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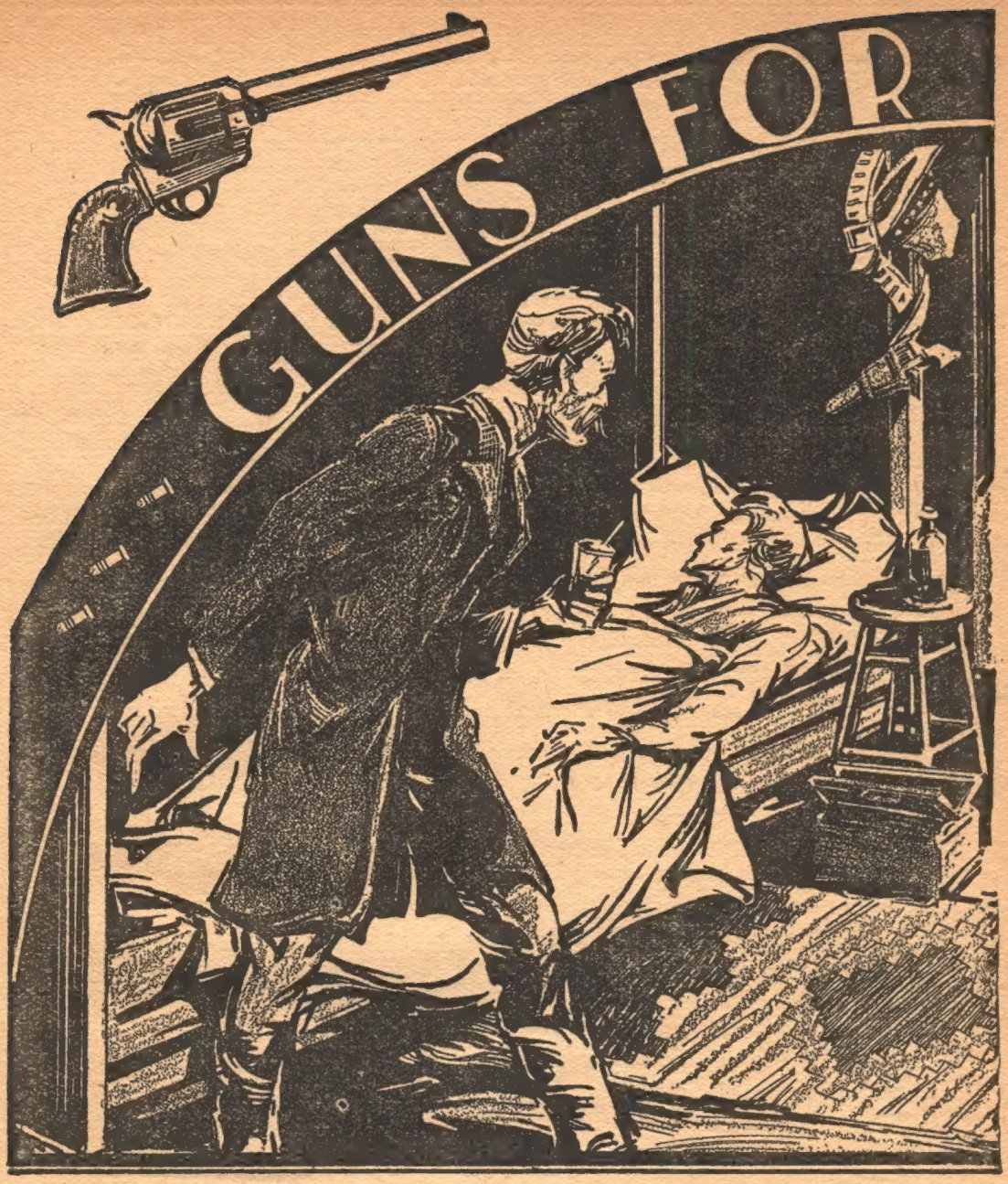

Killer's Gold Pulled Johnny's Triggers, His Sixes For Sale To The Highest Bidder—Then He Was Set To A Task That Even His Guns Frowned Upon And He Turned To His Conscience For Advice.

Johnny Weatherby leaned against the bar. His slate gray eyes, heritage of some Irish ancestor, were blank, and he stared steadily at the two men before him. Twenty-two years old, Johnny Weatherby, slight, spare, and at the moment potentially as dangerous as a bull rattlesnake in rutting time.

"Mebbe," he drawled softly, "you'd like to prove out on my nerve, Kenny. Mebbe you an' Dirk would both like to make a try at it."

Wade Kenny, foreman for the Long U, big, blond and blustering, shifted uneasily. It goes hard with a man when he orders another to dry-gulch a nester, is flatly told to go to hell,

Johnny threw himself to one side with a lithe, twisting motion. From a window near the bed a shotgun belched wickedly.

and then called to back his play. It went particularly hard with Kenny. He knew that if either he or Dirk Harbin, the sandy haired gunman beside him, made a movement, Johnny Weatherby would shoot. He also knew that Johnny Weatherby could get a Colt into action, either from his belt or from a belly holster, just a split second before any other man in New Mexico. That was why Johnny had been drawing seventy-five dollars a month from the Long U.

Johnny, having waited what seemed to him a decent interval, drawled again. "I reckon," he said, "that I'm fired. That suits me. If I wasn't, I'd have to quit. Old Shotgun Wagener

---

BENNETT FOSTER'S LATEST NOVEL

hired me to come down here an' look after his interests. He didn't say nothin' about dry-gulchin' nesters an' he didn't say nothin' about me havin' to run with a bunch of hydrophoby skunks like you two. I'll stick around for Wagener to come in an' pay me. I wouldn't even take his money from a polecat like you, Kenny."

Kenny's face turned a shade redder. He was boiling mad. He knew it, Dirk Harbin knew it, and Johnny Weatherby knew it. Another thing that all three knew was that Johnny wanted Kenny to make a break; and still another bit of information they possessed was that if Kenny did make a break Johnny would kill him.

Johnny grinned, a faint, barely perceptible twitching of the thin lips in the rock hard, youthful face. He moved along the bar, sliding with his back toward it. Near the door he half turned and backing, made for the opening. Just at the door he halted.

"I think I'll ride out an' see this Kirby Redman, Kenny," he drawled. "If he's any good I might herd him in here an' let you an' him have at it. Just remember, Kenny, that I don't hold with dry-gulchin', so if you try it on me be sure you make a job of it."

Two lithe, catlike steps backward and Johnny Weatherby was through the door. The two men in the barroom heard a mocking laugh, then the creak of leather and the sound of a horse's feet in the dusty street of Piedmont. Johnny Weatherby was gone.

Behind the bar of the Exchange Saloon, Fat George, the bartender, heaved a sigh of relief. Fat George hated to clean up a mess and at present he had no swamper.

Wade Kenny turned and confronted Dirk Harbin. "Why in hell did you let him talk like that, Dirk?" he blurted. "I thought you was hard! Why did you . . ?"

Harbin, blue eyes blazing, snapped an interruption "I didn't see you makin' no play, Kenny. By God I kept still because I didn't want my guts shot out! That's why I kept still. That little son meant killin', an' you know it!"

Kenny, his anger somewhat abated, nodded his big head. "He did," he said, and there was utter conviction in his voice. "Dirk, we got to do somethin' about that brat. He's bad as all hell an' he's plenty sudden. He means to ride out an' see Redman. That won't do. You got to stop him!"

Harbin lifted sandy eyebrows. "Yuh mean . . . ?"

"Just that." Kenny nodded vigorously. "Him an' Redman, too."

Down the bar Fat George coughed. "Will you gents have a drink?" he questioned. "I don't hear so good these days an' I thought mebbe you said you wanted liquor."

Kenny, scowling, wheeled and looked at the bland face of the fat bartender. There were beads of sweat on Fat George's bald head and a trickle of perspiration along his jaw. Kenny snapped a curse and fumbled in his pocket. Bringing out his hand he slapped a twenty-dollar gold piece on the bar top.

"Yeah," he growled, "we want whisky. Yore hearin'd better stay bad, George!"

Fat George slid out a bottle and two glasses, put the double eagle in his pocket and smiled blandly. "I cain't hear nothin' but money," he said.

When Johnny Weatherby left the angry pair in the Exchange Saloon and took to horseback, it was his own horse, Pansy, that he mounted. Pansy was a hammer headed buckskin horse with dark stockings on all four legs and a black stripe down the back. The buckskin gelding was possessed of a temper of Satan and could buck like a wild Brahma steer. Pansy's favorite occupation, outside of pitching, was chewing on an unwary rider's leg with his big yellow teeth. The big buckskin was a real traveler, however, and in Johnny Weatherby's business it was necessary to have a horse that could really cover country. Johnny's

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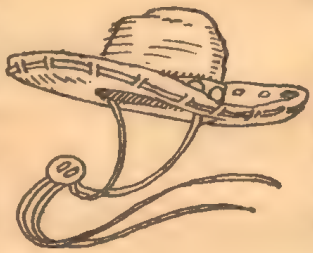
other horse, Blaze, a stocky bay, together with Johnny's bed roll and his war sack, were in the Trail Livery barn. Johnny had guessed shrewdly that he was on his way out of Long U employment when he came in to Piedmont.

Kicking Pansy in the face when the buckskin reached for his leg, Johnny rode blithely out of town. He felt as though he had removed a bad taste from his mouth when he had called Wade Kenny. The fact that he had been ready and willing to kill a man, more than willing, just a few short minutes before, bothered him not a whit. Johnny Weatherby had shot it out with a gunman when he was barely nineteen years old, and for the last four years his life had been one in which it was kill or be killed. When a man hires his gun he hires his life with it, and Johnny Weatherby, prime young devil, thought less of dying than he did of his ugly buckskin horse.



The KR, Johnny's destination, lay some twelve miles north of Piedmont in the Willow Forks valley. Hourglass creek bisected the valley and it was because of Hourglass creek and the valley that Johnny was in the country.

Nesters, little cow outfits, had taken the valley, taken it from the grasping hands of the Long U and the Terrapin ranches. These nesters, progressive, alert and watching their small herds with eagle eyes, had seen opportunity and made the most of it. They had dammed Hourglass creek, forming a little lake. From this lake they had a constant source of water, and making the most of that water they had run small ditches and seeps until along the old creek bank vega after vega shone green in the summer. These vega lands, meadow lands when the Spanish is interpreted, gave the nesters hay for winter feed, spring pasture when there was no other spring pasture, and a place to nurse late calves and weak cows.

At first the big outfits, the Long U and the Terrapin, had watched the nesters with careless, humorous eyes. Then, with three long hard dry years behind them they had tried to buy the small men out. Failing, there were mutterings on the ranges. The herds of these nesters were increasing too rapidly. There was rustling. Time to get the damn' so an' so's out of the country. So ran the talk, and hard-eyed men that carried ready weapons began to drift in and ride the rimrock above the Willow Forks valley, on Terrapin and Long U horses. Prominent among these was Johnny Weatherby, prime devil among lesser devils, young, unafraid, thoughtless, and a killer.

As he rode up the broad valley Johnny had no worries. He had money in his pocket, a good horse, albeit an evil one, between his legs, a gun on his hip and another in a belly scabbard, and a snatch of song on his lips. He passed the Open A, passed the Bradford outfit, and then, with six miles yet to go he slowed the buckskin and curled a cigarette the while he blithely informed the world:

If yuh monkey with mah Lulu
I'll tell yuh what I'll do . . .

At the KR, Kirby Redman's ranch, Johnny dismounted and led Pansy through a wire gate. Carefully replacing the wire he mounted again and rode slowly toward the house. To any other than Johnny Weatherby, that house might have spelled "home," the work of a man's hands. To Johnny it was just a house. Dismounting near the house he left the sullen Pansy tied to the earth with trailing reins, and still humming blithely, made his clumping way toward the door. The door opened before he could knock and a slight, grave-eyed girl, her cheeks flushed from work over a hot stove, stood surveying him.

Johnny's hat came off. "Is Mister Redman to home?" he questioned.

The girl's eyes scanned Johnny from the tips of his forty dollar boots to the top of his curly black head. She shook her head. "He's in town," she said, and the gravity of her voice matched her eyes. "Will you wait for him or leave a message?"

Johnny shifted uneasily under the scrutiny. "Just tell him that Johnny Weatherby was out to see him," he said, half turning. "I reckon I won't wait."

The gravity of the gray eyes changed to flashing scorn. "Johnny Weatherby!" There was utter contempt in the words. "The Long U gunman! You can get off this place, Mister Weatherby! I won't even bother to tell my father that you came!"

Here was something new in Johnny's experience. Fight he could and would, at the drop of a hat or even without that slight provocation; but he had never fought with a woman. Still, true to his nature, he turned back to face the attack.

"Mebbe," said Johnny Weatherby softly, "you think I ain't good enough to talk to yore dad."

Here was a fatal tactical error and the girl lashed out at him. "Good enough!" she snapped. "You aren't good enough to lick his boots. You aren't good enough to—"

"I didn't come to lick his boots," flashed Johnny. "I come to give him a piece of good advice. You tell him for me not to come out of his cabin in the daylight. Tell him . . . Now what the . . . !"

Deep growled profanity had interrupted Johnny's flow of words and he turned in time to see a tall, overalls-clad man kick viciously at Pansy. Beside the man another horse fought for distance at the end of bridle reins. Johnny, at a stumbling run, made for the combatants, yelling at Pansy.

The buckskin horse, knowing what was coming, moved clear, and Johnny arrived, breathless, beside the big fellow. He recognized the big man as Fancy Cotter, a small rancher from further up the Hourglass.

Cotter was angry. There was a tear in the leg of his Levis, and his face was livid. "I'll kill that damn' horse," he snarled as Johnny arrived. "He bit my leg. I just dodged in time. I'll—"

"You'll cool down, mister," interrupted Johnny. "That's my horse an' if he needs killin' I'll do it."

Cotter, mad all the way through, glared at the speaker. Johnny was small beside Cotter's big bulk and the nester, blustering and angry, did not note or pay attention to the danger signals in Johnny's eyes. Instead he glared over Johnny's shoulder at the girl who had followed when Johnny ran.

"What do you mean, Lois?" snapped Cotter. "Havin' strangers out here when yore dad's not to home. I told him that he'd ought to look out for you. He's too easy!"

Lois Redman's cheeks flamed in earnest now. She had been mad at Johnny, but that anger was as nothing to that which now possessed her. "Why you . . ." she began, but Johnny interrupted.

"Excuse me," he said politely, "excuse me, lady. I'll take care of this for yuh!" And without another word he jumped, leaping in, all of his one hundred and fifty pounds packed squarely behind the left fist that thudded home on Cotter's nose. Blood spurted from the outraged organ.

With a bellow Cotter struck back. His big fists flew but they were wide of the mark. For a moment Johnny was all over the bigger man. Then one of Cotter's ponderous swings went home. It felt to Johnny as though the side of a house had fallen on him. Another fist loomed bigger and bigger in the air. There was a

crash and the lights went out for Johnny Weatherby.

When Johnny came back to daylight he found that his head, his hair and his shirt were wet. His head hurt and as he opened his eyes water descended upon him in a deluge. He gasped, choked, and sat up to view Lois Redman, a bucket in her hands, standing almost above him. Johnny staggered to his feet, saw his hat and took two uncertain steps to retrieve it. Leaning down was almost too much effort but he managed to pick up his hat.

"Where'd he go?" demanded Johnny, shakily, when he had put his hat on.

The girl surveyed him quizzically. "Home," she answered. "I sent him there. Your horse bit him again when he went out the gate."

Johnny shook his head to clear it. "I reckon he sure smacked me down," he announced, grinning ruefully. "He sure done a job on me all right."

"He's twice your size." The girl was staring at Johnny and there was a strange look in her eyes. "Do you always go around taking on other people's fights like this?"

"I'm gradually learnin' not to." Johnny mopped water from his face with a handkerchief. "If you'll just tell me where that gent hangs out I reckon I'll go see him. Seems like we got several things to talk over."

"I'll not tell you where he lives," announced Lois Redman, firmly. "He's too big for you to fight with and if I told you where to find him that's what you'd do."

Johnny, a little glint of anger in his eyes, was on the point of telling the girl that there was an invention of Colonel Colt which made all men equal, but he held his tongue. Suddenly it dawned upon him that a Colt did *not* make men equal. What chance would this big granger have going up against him with a gun? Johnny flushed red at the thought, and the girl, misinterpreting the flush, spoke quickly.

"Some day when you feel better I'll tell you," she said. "Won't you come in and wait for father now?"

The question recalled Johnny's original errand and he shook his head. "I cain't right now," he said, not noticing Lois Redman's reversal of mind. "I got to go on back to town. You tell yore daddy for me what I said. Tell him not to go out of the house in the day times an' to be mighty careful in his ridin'."

There was a question in Lois Redman's eyes. "What do you mean?" she demanded, alarm in her voice. "Is there . . . ?"

"Never you mind," commanded Johnny harshly. "You tell him what I said." And with that he turned abruptly and pulling his hat down on his aching head, strode toward the waiting Pansy.

Riding back toward Piedmont Johnny was struck by a mixture of feelings, most of them new to him. He could not understand why he had warned the girl and he could not understand why he hadn't dodged that last big fist. Angry with himself he turned his horse sharply to the right when he was below the KR fence and followed a winding cowpath toward the mesa rim above him. Johnny had decided to take to the high country. It was safer and the breeze blew freer on the mesa top. Somehow Johnny felt that he needed a good wind to blow the cobwebs from his brain.

The Pansy horse made the last climb to the rim and stopped to blow, while Johnny, cocking a leg over the saddle horn, rolled another smoke. He lit it and looked down toward the valley three hundred feet below him. For a while he smoked reflectively and then, far down the valley road he saw a horseman coming steadily. Probably Redman on his way home. Johnny hoped that the girl would deliver his warning. Somehow he liked that girl.

Still smoking reflectively he saw the

horseman come on and following the road where it bent toward the creek he suddenly saw the horse jump sidewise, saw the rider reel in the saddle and clutch at the horn, and presently a flat report drifted up. Johnny cast his cigarette aside, swung Pansy, and started down the trail regardless of a broken neck or broken legs for Pansy. The lone rider had been dry-gulched!

CHAPTER II

BRANDED BAD

Johnny struck the valley bottom, turned Pansy south and stretched the big buckskin horse out until the gelding's belly was almost to the ground. Pansy wasn't particularly a handy horse but he could certainly run. Johnny, alert and helping the horse all he could, came thundering down the road, swung wide where the road and creek converged, and sliding the buckskin to a stop threw himself from the saddle. As he ran toward the man sprawled in the road he heard a horse pounding away, and jerking up his head Johnny caught a glimpse of a gray horse with a rider bent flat in the saddle. Johnny's Colt, automatically in his hand, spurted lead twice and the gray horse strung out and really began to run.

When he reached the man in the road Johnny stopped. The man was big, brown haired, and his eyes were open. Johnny, kneeling beside him, caught a whisper but it was so indistinct that he could not make it out. The brown eyes closed slowly, as though the man were tired, and Johnny with swift hands opened the blue shirt. The man was shot high up in the chest, hit hard and bad. Johnny glanced up, saw a bay horse bearing a KR on the shoulder grazing along the edge of the road, and the boy nodded grimly. His guess on the mesa had been right. This was Redman.

A hasty search brought out three handkerchiefs from Johnny's pockets and from Redman's. Johnny went to the creek, wet two handkerchiefs and brought them back. He packed one in place on Redman's back where the slug had come out, noting with satisfaction that the bullet had not mushroomed and that the hole was small. The other wet handkerchief went over the hole in front. There was blood there but it was not frothy. There was a chance that the lung had not been touched. Johnny lashed the handkerchiefs in place with his neckerchief, making the pack tight. That might stop the bleeding. Then he got up and started toward the moody Pansy. He had done what he could. It was time to get help.

As he reached the buckskin he heard horses and looked back. Three men were rounding the bend of the road near the creek. Johnny dropped Pansy's reins and went toward them. The three reined in, a gun flashed in the hands of the nearest rider, and a harsh command: "Han's up!" struck Johnny's ears. He recognized the man with the gun. It was Les Brown, deputy sheriff of Piedmont.

Automatically Johnny's hands went shoulder high. It would be foolish to go up against the drop, and besides he had no quarrel with these men. The other two were dismounting, and one of them pulled a gun and covered Johnny while Brown dropped from the saddle. Brown's face was grim.

"I reckon," he said slowly as he advanced, "that we got you right this time, Weatherby. By God I never thought you'd dry-gulch a man, though."

"Dry-gulched by a Long U gunman," growled one of the riders. "By God, Brown, why don't you let him have it? He's a . . ."

Les Brown, grim faced, snapped orders. "Payne, you make tracks for the Open A an' get a wagon. We'll take Redman there. Grissom, you ride to town for Doc. Get him out here an' don't say a dam' word about this. We don't want a war to break. Get this feller's guns before you start, Bart."

Bart Payne, scowling, advanced on Johnny and pulled the two Colts from

their holsters, one on the hip, one in the waist band, turning them over to the deputy sheriff. Verne Grissom had already mounted his horse. He was an older man, Grissom, and he knew the importance of his errand.

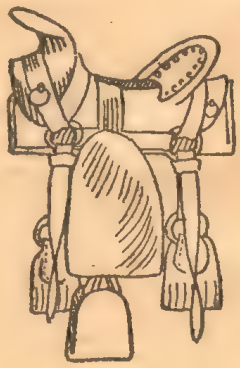
"You goin' to stay here with this ——?" Payne said plainly what he thought of Johnny.

Brown nodded. "'Til you get back," he said. "I'll handle him."

Payne climbed his horse. Grissom had already departed. "I'll be right back," snapped Payne. "They'll bring a wagon from the Open A."

Brown nodded and Payne spurred his horse away.

Johnny looked at the man on the ground. "He ain't dead," he said slowly. "I got him bandaged up. Mebbe you can do a better job. We ought to get him in the shade, too."



An expression of doubt began to supplant the grim scowl on Brown's face. "If yo're tryin' a trick—" he began.

"Hell!" said Johnny. "Let's get him in the shade."

Brown slid his gun slowly into his holster. "I'm watchin' you, Weatherby," he said. "You take his feet."

Together they carried the wounded man into the shade of the willows along the creek. Brown pulled Redman's gun from its holster and Johnny bent down to listen to the breathing of the wounded man.

"Mebbe he'll make it," he said.

Brown looked at the little gunman. "Mebbe you was tellin' the truth," he began doubtfully. "You said you was on the rim. Did you see who done this?"

Johnny shook his head. "I seen a gray horse," he answered. "If you want to you can look at my pony's feet an' mebbe find my tracks where I come off the rim."

Brown glanced at the man on the ground. "I can do that later," he said. "There's somethin' queer about this, Weatherby. Did you put on that bandage?"

Johnny nodded, wordlessly.

"It ain't yore reputation to dry-gulch a man." Brown was doubtful. "I don't get all this. Findin' you here . . . Hell!" The deputy was puzzled.

"Can I roll a smoke?" asked Johnny.

Brown slid his gun out again. "Go ahead!" he ordered.

Johnny got out the makings. A horse pounded along up the road and Bart Payne came in sight, rode up and stopped.

"They'll be along with the wagon in a minute," he said. "They had to run in some horses. How is he?" He nodded toward Redman.

"Livin'," replied Brown shortly. "Bart, you stay here. I'm goin' to take this feller in to town an' get Toliver to come back. There's somethin' fishy about all this."

Payne spoke bitterly. "Fishy is right! A damned Long U gunman droppin' Redman. I'll say it's fishy! If I was takin' him in he'd never get to town!"

Johnny mounted Pansy under Payne's ready gun. Les Brown also mounted and gestured Johnny ahead. Johnny rode slowly, hands locked on the saddle horn as commanded. Brown followed. They left Payne standing close beside Kirby Redman.

When the two, deputy and prisoner, had gone half a mile, Brown spoke suddenly. "Swing over an' take the rim trail!" he commanded. "There's no use of runnin' into a bunch of hot-heads from town."

Johnny glanced back at the deputy. Brown was frowning, but this was really a friendly gesture. Johnny nodded. "Thanks," he said, dryly, and turned Pansy's head toward the mesa.

In Piedmont, under Brown's direction, Johnny followed back streets

until they came to the little squat jail beside the courthouse. He walked ahead of Brown into the sheriff's office, listened while the deputy outlined briefly to the sleepy jailer what had happened, and walked docilely down the short corridor to a cell. The door clanged shut behind him and he turned to face Brown.

"I'm obliged to you," he said shortly. "When you get my horse put up look out for him. He's got a bad habit of bitin'."

Brown nodded. "I'll look up the sheriff an' we'll go right back out," he said. "By God, Weatherby, I don't believe—"

"You can check up on the tracks," said Johnny. "They won't tell yuh much but they might say somethin'."

Brown nodded, half friendly. "I'll try to make it back there before the wind starts," he said, and wheeling, clumped down the corridor.

Johnny smiled grimly after the departing deputy. By now the usual spring wind that howled each day out of the west, would have swept sand and dust over the faint tracks that Pansy had made coming down from the rim. Even those tracks, if they were found, wouldn't help much. When a man with a reputation as a gun-slinger is found bending over a man who has been hard shot there is generally just one interpretation. If he lasted for a jury trial Johnny knew what would happen. He was in bad with the Long U and the Terrapin. In equally bad with the small ranchers. There wouldn't be any change of venue, there wouldn't be anything except a hanging. The somnolent jailer came down the corridor and looked in at Johnny.

"Want anythin'?" he questioned.

"I could stand some grub," answered Johnny.

The jailer nodded and retreated down the corridor again. "I'll send out for some," he threw back over his shoulder.

When the jailer brought the desired food he also gave Johnny information. Les Brown hadn't been able to find the sheriff in town and had ridden out alone. As yet the townspeople had not been apprised of the crime. The doctor had not come back and the jailer didn't know whether or not Kirby Redman was still alive.

Johnny ate the substantial meal that was brought him, pushed the dishes and tray outside the door and lay down on the hard cot. Nothing that he could do right now. He put his head back and thinking deeply, relaxed his tired muscles.

Late in the afternoon, while the wind howled around the little brick jail, Johnny was brought out of his lethargy by a visitor. Dirk Harbin, accompanied by the jailer, came down the corridor and stopped just outside the door. Dirk and the jailer were arguing.

"You go on an' let me talk to Johnny," directed Dirk. "I want to talk to him private."

The jailer demurred and Dirk resumed his argument, using first persuasion and finally a veiled threat. The threat worked where persuasion hadn't. The jailer was afraid of Dirk, afraid of his reputation. He had a right to be. Dirk was forty years old and had been selling his gun all his life. He had spent two terms in prison for manslaughter and had been pardoned both times. His scowl and words sent the jailer scurrying and Harbin turned to Johnny.

"What's all this about?" he demanded. "I heard you was in jail an' I come to see what I could do for you."

Johnny smelled an Ethiopian among the cordwood. That didn't sound like Dirk Harbin at all, but Johnny masked his feelings. "I got caught bendin' over Kirby Redman," he announced laconically. "Kirby had been shot."

Harbin cast a hurried glance up and down the corridor. "I thought you was OK, Johnny," he said. "I told

Kenny that you was all right, that you was just kiddin' him. Where'd you get Redman?"

Johnny was on the point of saying that he hadn't gotten Redman at all, but thought better of it. If Dirk Harbin really wanted to help he might be able to. Johnny shrugged his shoulders.

"I ain't sayin'," he answered. "Has that damn' sheriff an' his deputy come in yet?"

Harbin shook his head. "Not yet," he answered. "Say, Johnny, you was a damn' fool for doin' it out in the open that way. I ain't blamin' you, but you was a fool. These little ranchers are wantin' to hang you."

Johnny shrugged. "Likely," he admitted.

"You got to get out of here." Dirk lowered his voice. "This town is fillin' up with these little fellers. They're fixin' to take you out of jail an' string you up higher'n a kite!"

Johnny was politely interested. "You don't say?" he remarked.

"Yeah. Now listen. You get hungry pretty quick. Get plenty hungry an' send this dumb egg jailer out for grub. He'll go to the Chink's. When the grub comes back there'll be somethin' in it that you can use. Get me?"

Johnny nodded. "I get you," he said.

"I cain't be mixed up in this," continued Harbin. "They'd tack it on me mighty quick an' there ain't any Long U or Terrapin boys in town to back my play. Just the same there'll be a horse outside. You grab that horse an' leave the country. Get it?"

Johnny nodded. "Thanks," he said. "I get it."

Harbin stuck out his hand and Johnny took it. Harbin, after a hasty shake, turned away and walked down the corridor to where the jailer was waiting. They went out together, talking in low tones.

This, thought Johnny Weatherby, was very, very queer. Harbin had been called, and called hard, that morning. It wasn't in his nature to make a play like this for the man who had called him. Johnny thought it over and grinned cheerfully. The chances were, he thought, that he'd run into a load of buckshot the moment he cleared the jail door in his break for liberty. That would be about it; buckshot, maybe two loads. He whistled a tuneless little song to himself and considered.

CHAPTER III

JOHNNY GET YORE GUN

The afternoon waned. It was nearly dark when he heard men arrive at the jail, and presently Gib Toliver, the sheriff, a big black haired man, came down the corridor. Brown was back of Toliver. The two opened the cell door and took Johnny to the jail office. The county attorney, Ben Morgan, was in the office and the three, Toliver, Brown, and Morgan, put Johnny on the grill.

Brown hadn't seen anything that made him believe Johnny's story, and said so. Johnny, under Morgan's questioning, told just what had happened, no more and no less. There was a bruise on Johnny's cheek where Fancy Cotter's big fist had landed, and Morgan questioned Johnny closely concerning it but got no answer. Johnny wasn't mentioning his quarrel with Kenny and Harbin that morning, and he wasn't mentioning his trip to the KR. One thing he did learn and that was that Kirby Redman was still alive.

Finding that they could get nothing from Johnny, Toliver escorted his prisoner back to the cell and locked him in. When the door closed behind him, Johnny requested food, and Toliver promised that he would have a meal. Johnny scowled after Toliver's departing back. He didn't like the sheriff. There was something in Toliver's eyes that didn't look good.

The meal came on a tray, brought by the jailer. Johnny ate leisurely, chewing slowly. Almost at once he had spotted the weapon that Harbin

had sent in. It was a heavy, rounded lump of iron that looked for all the world like a piece of meat in the stew which was on Johnny's plate. That lump of iron, wrapped in a sock, say, might do a whole lot. Johnny thought it over. A blow from that iron might kill a man, very probably would if it landed right. He wiped off the iron and put it in his pocket. An idea struck him and he grinned. He had just spotted a big piece of laundry soap and the wash bucket that graced the cell. Johnny took off his shirt and went over to wash.

When he had finished his ablutions he took the big tin tray which held his supper dishes and, removing the chinaware, turned the tray over and rubbed wet soap all over the back. When that was done he removed one of his socks, put the lump of iron in it, and again donned his boot. It was completely dark now and the jailer had lit a lamp at the head of the corridor between the cells. Johnny very quietly slid the tray, bottom up, under the door and left it so that an edge was inside the cell. He then donned his shirt and called the jailer. Johnny was buttoning the shirt when the man came.

Johnny said, "Here's my dishes," and gestured toward the china on the bunk.

The jailer stood well away from the cell. "You pass 'em out," he directed. "I ain't takin' no chances with you. There's men in town now talkin' about lynchin' you!"

"Is that so?" Johnny was apparently pleasantly surprised. "I'll just pass the dishes out." He half turned toward the bunk. The jailer took one short step toward the cell door, put his foot on the soaped tray and Johnny, watching over his shoulder, kicked the edge of the tray that was in the cell. For a moment the jailer did a clog waltz in the air, then his other foot struck the slippery top of the tray and he lurched toward the cell. The sock-covered lump of iron in Johnny's hands came down with a thud. Reaching through the bars he caught the jailer as he fell.

From there on Johnny worked rapidly. The jailer had the keys on his belt. Johnny got these and let himself out of the cell. He bound the jailkeeper with the man's own belt and with strips torn from the blanket in the cell. The man had no gun and Johnny regretted the omission. Having bound and gagged the jailer he hauled the man into the cell and shut the door carefully. The jailer, Johnny thought, would keep awhile. After all he had nothing worse than a headache. Johnny's own head ached a little.

Having disposed of his keeper Johnny next moved toward the front of the jail. There was a little office there, the jailer's quarters. It was there that he had been questioned. Johnny looked about but found no weapons. Evidently they were kept in the sheriff's office in the courthouse.

Curious concerning Dirk Harbin, Johnny lifted the edge of the drawn shade a trifle and peered out into the street. There was a saloon across from the courthouse and as Johnny watched he saw Wade Kenny come from the saloon and stand talking with a man who lurked in the shadows beside the building. Kenny was plain in the light and when he turned to leave Johnny caught a glimpse of lamplight on steel. He grinned to himself. He had been right about the shotgun. Johnny scratched his head. He wanted out of there.

Casting about for a way to get his wish he saw a door other than the street door. He opened it cautiously and found that it led into a passage. This would be the passage between the jail and the courthouse, Johnny guessed. Opening the door wider, he slid into the passageway. Johnny followed it to its end, sock covered iron ready in his hand, opened the door at the other end, and found himself in

the dark courthouse. He could hear voices and, guided by his ears, went toward the sound.

The upper corridor of the courthouse was dark. Johnny found that was so when he went up the stairs. He passed the Assessor's office and the door to the courtroom, and stopped just outside a door marked "Sheriff's Office." The voices and a light came from behind that door. Johnny listened.

"Somebody's got to take care of that damn' fool Brown." That was Toliver the sheriff's growl. "He's too damned honest. I had him wished on me an' now I can't get rid of him."

Johnny's eyes blinked as he heard the rumbling reply. That voice belonged to only one man and that man was Shotgun Wagener. Johnny wondered when Wagener had come to town.

"We'll take care of Brown when the time comes. Him an' Morgan both," Wagener rumbled. "Thing is that right now we got to get possession of the Hourglass cabin an' the dam. If we're holdin' that we can dictate to the rest. We can run these little nesters so far from the Willow Forks it'll take 'em a month to get back."

"Fancy Cotter is holdin' down the Hourglass for us," rejoined Toliver. "The nesters think he's one of 'em, the damn' fools. We can take that any time."

"Tonight," said Wagener firmly. "We got to have that. If we got it, what's left of these people won't have a leg to stand on."

Toliver chuckled and Johnny wondered what Wagener meant when he said, "What's left of these people." Johnny Weatherby was rapidly forming a dislike for Shotgun Wagener.

"What about Redman?" growled Wagener.

"He's at the Open A," Toliver replied. "Last I heard he was mebbe goin' to make it. Dammit!"

"You was the one that muffed it. You better go out," said Wagener significantly. "Redman is half of the nesters all by himself."

Toliver grunted an affirmative.

Steps sounded on the stairs and Johnny tiptoed down the corridor to the door of the courthouse. The door opened under his hand and he slipped inside. He heard the sheriff's door open and close and Johnny went out into the corridor again.

Standing beside the sheriff's door he heard Wagener greet Kenny gruffly. "Where you been, Kenny?"

"Out scoutin' around," answered Kenny. "Say, Dirk's layin' to pull a fast one. He slipped Weatherby a chunk of iron to use for a blackjack an' Dirk's across the street now with a shotgun waitin' for Weatherby to try to make his break. If the jailer don't git him, Dirk will."

Wagener swore feelingly and Toliver snarled at Kenny. "You damn' fools! We don't want that!"

"Why not?" Kenny was surprised.

"Hell! These little ranchers are fixin' to take Weatherby out an' hang him. I got a dozen special deputies around the courthouse an' the jail right now, waitin' for 'em to start. We'll thin 'em out plenty when they do!"

Kenny whistled softly. "I see," he said. "All law abidin', too. Yo're smart, Toliver."

"Smart, hell! It was Wagener that thought of that! You get out to Dirk an' tell him to lay off. I'm goin' down an' see that Weatherby don't get a chance to make a break!"

It was time to do something. Time right now! Johnny jerked up his sock-covered lump of iron and sent it sailing down the corridor.

Toliver yelped, "What's that?" and jerked open the door. Johnny flattened himself against the wall.

Led by Toliver the men in the office boiled out. Wagener was the last of the trio, coming more slowly than the others. Johnny stuck out a foot and Wagener went down. Toliver and Kenny were almost at the end of the hall, nearly to the broken window. Johnny, leaping over the scrambling Wagener, jumped into the office, threw the door closed and turned the key. He ran across the room to the open window, thrust out his head and yelled.

"The window, Dirk. He's gettin' out the east window!"

There was a bellow from the street. Dirk Harbin ran across in front of the saloon, shotgun across his chest. Johnny didn't see him. After that yell he had jerked in his head and made for the sheriff's desk.

Glass in the door crashed and a gun roared in the corridor. One of the men in the hall was shooting through the door.

Johnny pulled open the drawer in the center of the sheriff's desk and grinned at what he saw. His own two Colts were lying there. Johnny swept up the weapons, caught up a box of shells that lay beside them and jumped to the window again. In the street a shotgun roared. Harbin was shooting at the window. Johnny stopped short. No use committing suicide! He threw a shot at the door and another at the lighted ceiling lamp. The lamp puffed flame and then went out. Brass and glass crashed to the floor and Johnny, sliding out the window, dropped to the roof of the porch some six feet below him. He hit the roof, and crouching, moved to the heavy railing that went around the edge of the porch.

Below him was a scene of confusion. Men were running from the Exchange Saloon across the street. Other men came from the Oriental Bar further up the street. There were yells and curses. Some of the running men stopped at the hitch rail beside the Exchange and mounted horses. The street looked like a disturbed hornets' nest. Johnny grinned grimly. Certainly there would be no ambush now. Toliver's special deputies would have no chance to fire into an unsuspecting bunch of nesters come to get a man from jail and hang him.

Further up the street a gun crashed and others joined it. They were shooting at shadows. Someone yelled: "There he goes!" and the milling crowd from the Oriental and the Exchange turned and started in the direction of the yell. There was a profane ejaculation from the window of the sheriff's office and Johnny turned and threw one accurate shot in that direction. The curse changed to a yelp of pain and Johnny, taking his chances, threw a leg over the railing around the porch roof and went over it.

There was a ledge outside the railing. Just room for his toes on the ledge. Johnny holstered his gun and caught the railing with both hands.

One groping toe found the capital of a column that supported the roof. Johnny lowered himself. The column was big, nearly too big. Johnny caught at the carved top with clutching fingers, got his legs around the column and turned loose with his hands. Someone was shooting from the sheriff's office and men were running back toward the courthouse. Johnny hit the bottom of the column with a bump, released the grip of his legs and rolled off the low bottom porch to the ground.

He lay quiet for a moment and then crawled to the end of the stone porch. He didn't think that his wild slide had been seen but he wasn't sure. Peering around the edge of the platform he saw a little, determined group of men coming down the street. The man in the lead was Verne Grissom. Evidently the nesters of the Willow Forks valley were coming down on the jail. It wouldn't do at all. Toliver's men might still be in ambush.

Johnny sent two shots over the approaching group and watched them scatter for cover. It was time for him to get to cover himself. Someone had spotted his hideout and was doing considerable business with a gun. A slug knocked stone chips from the corner of the landing where Johnny crouched and the former Long U gunman pulled in his neck and scuttled like a crab for shelter.

He went around the corner of the courthouse, gun out and feeling ahead of him. There was a noise to his left, he turned, took one step backwards and bumped squarely into the back of a man who was backing toward him. Johnny turned first!

His descending Colt crashed against a man's head and the man went down. Johnny started on, stopped and went back. There had been something familiar about the figure, even in the darkness. He stooped over the man he had felled, fumbled in his pocket and got out a match. In the light of the tiny momentary flame of the match he saw that the man on the ground was Les Brown. Johnny's forehead furrowed in thought. Brown was honest. What was he doing here? Johnny shook his head. Brown was probably only doing his duty, trying to prevent a jail break. There must be something that he could do with Les Brown, some way to use him! Johnny wished that he knew what it was. At any rate he could prevent Brown's doing any further hunting for Johnny Weatherby! He found the deputy's handcuffs in his hip pocket, got them out and snapped them on the man's wrists. When that was done Johnny started on.

The things that he had heard in the sheriff's office filled his mind. Wagener and Toliver and Kenny were the prime movers in this, all right. Johnny wouldn't have thought it of Wagener. He had really wanted to stay with the man who had hired him. Not that he would dry-gulch a nester at Kenny's orders, but he had hired himself to Wagener. Now Wagener had let him down. That killed Johnny's loyalty to the man. He was sore at the nesters too. They thought that he had dropped Kirby Redman and were out to hang him for it! It was a hell of a mess. It would be a good idea for Johnny Weatherby to get himself a horse and pull his freight. Get clear of the country. Johnny shook his head. He wasn't going to let Kenny and Toliver and Wagener get away with anything like that! No sir! Besides, he had a little business to settle with Dirk Harbin. He'd warned Harbin that if Dirk tried to dry-gulch Johnny Weatherby it had better be good. Dirk had tried all right but he hadn't made the grade!

The livery barn was just down the street a short distance. Pansy and Blaze and a pretty good outfit were in the livery barn. Johnny ran across a semi-lighted street to an alley and started down it. He knew what he'd do now! He'd put a mighty big monkey wrench in the machinery for Wagener and those others.

The back door of the stable was locked. Johnny could still hear the turmoil back of him in Piedmont's main street. He pried at the hasp and lock with the barrel of his single action and got the hasp loose. Evidently the stable man had gone down to see what the excitement was.

Johnny got the back door open and went into the stable. There was a lantern hanging from the roof near the front door. In the light from the lantern Johnny could see Pansy's buckskin rump.

Within a few minutes after he had entered the stable Johnny was leading out the buckskin horse. He chose the back door into the alley for his exit. He got the buckskin away, led the animal up the alley for a distance and then mounted, despite Pansy's objections.

Johnny rode slowly away for he did

not want to cause further alarm, and as he rode he resolved plans for action in his mind. He chuckled softly to himself. When Wagener and Kenny and the rest went to the cabin by the Hourglass dam they were due for a surprise. Wagener thought that holding the cabin was important, did he? Well, if Wagener thought so then Johnny would get out and hold the cabin! That was that! He gave Pansy a little taste of spurs and the buckskin snorted and moved ahead.

When he was clear of Piedmont Johnny headed up the valley. He had never been to the Hourglass dam but he knew where it was. It was above the Open A and the KR. Johnny nodded to himself. It would be a good idea to stop at the Open A. Redman was there and the chances were that Wagener and Kenny would make a play against Redman. Redman was the leader of the valley nesters. Johnny knew that and from what he had heard he thought probably Toliver would be delegated to get Redman permanently out of the picture. He pushed the surly buckskin along.

CHAPTER IV

THE COLT CURE

There were lights at the Open A when Johnny reached the place. He stopped Pansy, dismounted and opened the gate. Then, leaving the wire down, he led the horse through and went on to the house. Just before the house he paused and felt of the Colt in his belly scabbard. Leaving the buckskin ground tied he mounted the porch, crossed to the door, and without knocking, pushed it open.

There were two men in the room who sprang up at Johnny's entrance. One of these he recognized as Tom Arthur, owner of the Open A. The other was a short, corpulent man, covered by a wrinkled suit, the single doctor that Piedmont boasted. On a bed toward the left side of the room was Kirby Redman. Arthur and the doctor froze under the threat of Johnny's drawn Colt.

"A hell of a fine watch you keep," drawled Johnny. "Where's Lois Redman?"

Tom Arthur growled, "What's it to you?" and the little doctor shifted uneasily under Johnny's hard stare.

"It's plenty to me," drawled Johnny. "You damn' fools don't know it, but Kenny an' Toliver are plannin' to put Redman away for keeps."

"An' I suppose yo're just a innocent young fellow tryin' to get along." There was defiance in Arthur's words and something else that warned Johnny of danger.

The young gunhand sidestepped from the door, moving swiftly.

"Not so damn' innocent!" he snapped. "If I had a mind to I could down every man in this room an' you know it. Now, where's the girl?"

It was the doctor that began to stammer an answer. "She . . . she went out," he began. "She . . . she . . ."

"Doc!" snapped Tom Arthur sternly.

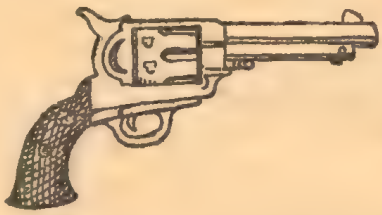
The doctor subsided.

Johnny Weatherby, still feeling that subtle sense of danger, still unable to place its cause, spoke swiftly. "Listen, you!" he snapped at Arthur, "I'm givin' the orders here right now! Not you! I come out here to tell Lois Redman somethin'. Toliver an' Wagener an' Kenny are plannin' to take yore precious dam. They're plannin' to kill Redman. I come . . ."

"The sheriff?" Arthur was plainly incredulous. "That's a likely story, that is! What kind of a fool do you take me for? Why . . . Hah!"

The ejaculation was a harsh bark. Johnny threw himself to one side with a lithe, twisting motion. From a window near the bed a shotgun belched wickedly, vomiting smoke and lead. The load crashed into the wall where Johnny had been and the explosion reverberated in the confines of the little cabin room. Johnny, throwing

up his gun even as he moved, tensed his trigger finger and then let it relax. He did not want to kill a man here! He had come to help, not to harm! He struck the floor on his shoulder, pitched over and started up, cat-like, to his feet. Someone, Arthur or the doctor, had blown out the lamp. The room was pitchy dark and the spent gas and smoke from the explosion hung heavy in it. To his right Johnny heard a man move and swung in that direction.



An impossible situation, this! Caught in a trap like a rat, but unlike the rat unable to fight back. Johnny stifled a groan. He couldn't shoot his way out of this, couldn't! He had no quarrel with these men, none at all, but they evidently thought that they had plenty of quarrel with him. He could hear a heavy footed man moving in front of him.

At another time and place Johnny could have thrown a slug squarely into the center of that movement. He couldn't now! He moved his right foot back, a cautious, silent step, followed it with his left foot and felt behind him with the right again. His heel struck against the wall and he flattened his back there and listened Neither Arthur nor the doctor made a sound. From outside a man called hoarsely, "Tom! . . . Tom!"

Arthur did not answer.

Johnny inched along the wall, moving toward the door. He wanted out of there! Wanted out badly! He heard a hoarse, rasping of breathing and then, weak but distinct, Kirby Redman spoke from the bed.

"Lois! Where's Lois, Tom?"

Johnny's groping hand struck a chair. He lifted it very gently and then, with a quick twist, sent it whirling into the center of the room. Instantly a gun crashed from near Redman's bed and another echoed it from the window. Johnny, while the thunder of shots still filled the room, reached the door and jerked it open.

He dropped back through the door, swung around the edge just in time to escape another shot, and running across the porch, vaulted the railing and struck for where he had left Pansy. The big buckskin horse was gone!

Back in the house he could hear Arthur calling hoarsely for Curly to get Weatherby. Taking a chance, Johnny now sent two shots from his Colt toward the house and had the satisfaction of hearing the door hastily slammed. Johnny moved on back toward the gate. Someone, probably the man called Curly, was shooting from beside the house and coming mighty close to the mark, too. Johnny cursed his own inability to answer the fire. It was trying, he thought, to have to pose as a target. He backed squarely into a horse and dodged just in time to avoid a snap of vicious, yellow teeth. Johnny made a hasty grab, found leather, and not bothering about any formal method of mounting, swarmed into the saddle.

Tom Arthur had now changed his cry. He was demanding vociferously that Curly start after the so and such. Curly, apparently, wasn't having any. Johnny got Pansy through the gate and fighting the big hammer headed buckskin, got started down the lane. He was mighty lucky, he knew, to have a whole skin, and he cursed his own stupidity. After all he had walked in on an errand of peace with a Colt in his hand.

As he reloaded the gun Johnny wondered where Lois Redman was. She hadn't been at the Open A, that was certain. Lois Redman was the kind of a girl that, at the first sign of danger would have gone to her father. No, she certainly wasn't at the Open A.

Then where was she? In town? Johnny hoped not. Perhaps she had gone to the KR. That would be about

it. Johnny thought that he had better stop at the KR. He wanted to see the girl and warn her of her father's danger. She would listen to him, he believed. He sent Pansy right along.

The KR was dark. There was no sign of a light. Johnny rode in and investigated but all that he could raise was a dog that barked angrily in the barn. Johnny gave it up. He would have to go on if he planned to reach the Hourglass cabin and the dam before it was light. He had come twelve miles from town. He couldn't have left Piedmont much before ten o'clock and it must now be after twelve. He didn't know how much further he had to go but there would be some light at about three and Johnny didn't want to reach the Hourglass when it was light. He left the KR and set Pansy to a lope.

As he rode on north the thought occurred to Johnny Weatherby that at least his advent would put the men at the Open A on their toes. They would be alert now and looking for trouble. Even if they hadn't believed him he had done that much good on his errand. There wasn't much comfort in the idea but what little there was, Johnny took.

He rode for perhaps three quarters of an hour, alternating trot and walk with lope, because he wanted to save his horse. He might need Pansy later and the horse had already made one good trip that day. At the end of the forty-five minutes Johnny saw a fire off to his right. He turned toward it. That, he believed, would be the watch fire on the Hourglass dam and the end of his present journey. Some little distance below the fire Johnny stopped, scouted around and finally tied Pansy in a little clump of cedars. He believed that he could find those cedars again, either in daylight or darkness. He had no fear of the horse's nickering and thus betraying his presence. Pansy had been trained not to make much noise and anyhow he was too damned mean and unsociable to whinny. Leaving Pansy tied by the neck to a cedar tree and the bridle fastened to the saddle horn, Johnny got the fifteen-inch barreled thirty-thirty Winchester from his saddle scabbard and went forward afoot. He was glad as he advanced, that he had collected the Winchester from his bed roll in the livery barn.

Cautiously advancing on foot toward the fire he learned that he was correct as to its location. The fire was almost in the center of the dirt and rock dam that the men of the Willow Forks valley had thrown up across the Hourglass creek. The dam was not long and the fire sent flickering shadows almost to either end. On the right, above the dam and the lake, was the bulk of a cabin against the hill, its outlines defined by the dim glow of the fire that carried to it, and also by the light that came from what Johnny believed to be loopholes. The door of the cabin was closed and there was no light from the windows. Evidently these were shuttered and closed.

Johnny Weatherby, forsaking direct action for the part of safety, scouted toward the fire. There should be a fire tender and Johnny wanted to collect that worthy. There was a big rick of wood close to the fire but search as he would Johnny could see no one near either the rick or the blaze.

He worked along the side hill toward the left end of the dam and reaching it went up hill in a short circle until he came to the edge of the lake. Reasoning that the watchers would not expect an attack from the lake side of the dam Johnny now came down the hill and dropping to his belly, crawled cautiously to the embankment. Well down toward the water's edge, hidden from the firelight by the dark shadow of the bank, he straightened up and went forward again, crouching for what protection he could get.

He had advanced well toward the

center of the dam when his foot struck a round rock that rolled out from under it. Johnny staggered for balance, slipped, hit sitting down and proceeded to slide, rocks and dirt rolling around him. There was plenty of noise and more than plenty when he struck the water. He didn't go clear in, managing to check his slide when he was up to his waist, but up on the bank, a hidden watcher by the wood rick, cut loose with a Winchester and did some very effective shooting.

Johnny heard slugs spat into the water close to him, too close for comfort. He rolled over on his belly and without trying to get out of the lake, returned the fire. At the moment he was wet and so mad that he didn't care what happened. He kept the little Winchester carbine rattling and the man by the wood rick, suddenly treated to a deluge of splinters, quit the protection of the wood pile and ran hot foot and yelling for the cabin. Johnny, having emptied the Winchester and vented a little of his spleen, crawled out of the water.

He cast a longing glance at the fire. The fire would be nice and warm but it would be suicide to go to it to get dry. Feeling in his pockets he swore fervently. There were no more shells for the Winchester. All he had now, in the way of weapons, were the two Colts in the waistband of his pants. He didn't even have a belt for he had not found his belt and shells in the drawer of the sheriff's desk. He had about twenty forty-five shells in the box and ten more in the Colts, five in each gun, and with that somewhat feeble arsenal, he had contracted a fair sized war. For the moment he felt that perhaps this once he had bitten off more than he could chew.

There was, however, no time for regrets. The time to have thought of this situation was some hours earlier. In the meantime the watcher on the dam had received reinforcements from the cabin and was coming back. Johnny regretfully laid aside the Winchester and devoted his attention and the contents of one Colt to this advance.

In their haste the crew watching the dam had not closed the cabin door when they advanced and light streamed out behind them. Johnny failed at any time to score a center shot. It was night and the range was perhaps sixty yards, but he did have excellent target practice for a moment. The advance changed to a headlong retreat when one of the watchers encountered hot lead and squawked feelingly. The door of the cabin slammed and Johnny, reloading his gun from his scanty supply of shells, began an advance along the embankment, being careful to keep well below the top. He went a few steps and then returned for the Winchester. A very simple remedy for the lack of ammunition had occurred to him. All he had to do was get into the cabin. There would be plenty of shells in there no doubt. Simple, wasn't it?

In the meantime Fancy Cotter and his men had retired into their fortress. From the loopholes they kept up a running fire, burning up what Johnny already considered to be his own good shells. Thirty-thirty slugs tore gravel from the top of the dam and whined away into the graying night. There was plenty of shooting.

Johnny reserved his own fire, thus conserving ammunition. At the end of the dam he had to wade. He was already wet and a little added water made no difference. His boots were full and the sockless foot felt cold and numb.

Johnny got around the end of the dam with intact skin due to the fact that the men in the cabin were watching the fire and shooting near it. Once more on fairly dry land after this seagoing expedition, Mister Weatherby advanced toward the cabin. By the time he had reached the fringe of trees that was on the hillside above the building, he had sloshed most of

the water out of his boots. He knew, however, that he would have one hell of a time getting those boots off and the thought angered him. It did not occur to Johnny Weatherby, engaged in an insane enterprise, that he might not live to pull off those boots.

CHAPTER V

THE ONE-MAN STAMPEDE

Above the cabin, peering through the darkness, he planned on how he might best enter the place. The windows? No, for the windows must be shuttered and barred. There remained the doors and, ever courteous, Johnny decided that the front door was the proper one. He moved around to the front and at an angle knocked on the front door with three slugs from a forty-five.

There was plenty of answer. The shooting at the dam stopped and began again from the front and sides. Someone, Johnny thought, had surely provided that cabin with plenty of loopholes. He grunted at wasted effort and, the men being busy with the front of the cabin, Johnny made a pigeontoed run for the rear. He made it and stopped, trying to restrain his panting, close beside the little lean-to shed which was the kitchen.

A cautious attempt on the back door of the lean-to proved it to be barred. Johnny had thought so, anyhow, and was not disappointed. The noise he made brought a man to the rear but there was no shooting from the lean-to. This was strange but fortunate. Johnny thought it over. Presently, mounting a water barrel he reached for the roof of the shed. He had his hands half way up when he detected motion along the cabin wall. A hasty shot scored a blank but brought a yelp and a mad dash from the venturesome inmate; and Johnny, catching the edge of the roof with both hands, hoisted up his wet legs. From the lean-to roof to the roof of the main cabin was but a matter of moments. There he slid down cautiously to the far side and blasted the hopes of a man who had come out the door and was scouting on that side. He did not miss.

It now became Johnny's intent to make the inside of the cabin unhealthy for its occupants. He wanted in, he wanted the others out. One man he was sure would not cause further trouble. Another he had run back into the cabin. There would be, he believed, four men inside. There had been five shooting when he was on the dam. Climbing rapidly and without regard to noise, he reached the ridge pole of the cabin and there dropped the remnants of his box of shells into the faintly smoking chimney, reserving only three for his partially empty gun. Having dropped the shells he let go all holds and slid, the rough shakes of the roof playing havoc with the seat of his pants and that portion of his anatomy immediately beneath. He hit the ground with a thump, staggered to his feet and made for the front of the cabin. He had slid not a moment too soon for the men inside were shooting wildly through the roof.

Johnny reached the front of the cabin in time to hear the first of the forty-five shells explode in the stove. Inside the cabin a man yelled shrilly. Two or three more shells went off all together, the stovepipe rattled down and a stove lid clanged against some object. All the men in the cabin were yelling now. High above the clamor came one voice filled with fright.

"Dynamite!" came the scream.

The front door of the cabin burst open and men tumbled out. Johnny took a hasty shot at the runners, missed, and ducked into the cabin. He kicked the door closed behind him and threw himself to the floor. As he went down the rest of the shells in the stove let go, the stove fell with a bang and brass from one of the shells whined by Johnny's ear, striking the wall with a "chunk."

Johnny, lying on the floor, gave the cabin one hasty glance to be sure it was empty. A lamp burned on a rough plank table and in its light he saw that there was no one in the room. The door bar was under his outflung hand and he pulled it to him. The stove was on its side, a wreck, and soot from the stovepipe was everywhere. Some of the hot embers from the stove had started a little blaze on the floor. Johnny came to his feet, dropped the door bar in place and looked about him. There was a water barrel in one corner with a bucket near him. Johnny, running across the cabin, threw the contents of the bucket at the blaze. The fire went out and the hot iron of the stove hissed under the water.

There was a cupboard nearby the water barrel and on the shelves were shell boxes. Plenty of thirty-thirty's, and forty-fives here! The little Winchester was outside, however, abandoned when Johnny had taken to the roof. He did not see a rifle in the room but there was a shotgun in one corner.

As Johnny took a box of shells from the cupboard and dumped them into the pocket of his Levis, gunshots filled the cabin and a slug plucked sharply at his arm, burning along the length of his forearm. Someone of the former defenders of the cabin had pushed a Colt through a loophole and emptied it. There was too blame' much light in the cabin, Johnny realized, and he dropped to the floor, crawled to the table and reaching up with a cautious hand pulled down the lamp and blew it out. If all of the men who had been inside were against the walls they could make it mighty unhealthy for Johnny Weatherby.

Apparently they were all close to the walls. From time to time guns flamed within the cabin, never from the same loophole. These men outside were fighters, not fighting men in the sense that Johnny Weatherby was a fighting man, but good, willing workers, nevertheless. They made it tough. Johnny hugged the floor because that was the safest place, but even the floor was none too safe. He couldn't tell from what loophole an attack was coming and he couldn't tell when it would come. The situation irked Johnny; it grieved him considerably, and he resolved to do something about it.

He felt of the log wall beside him and found it was chinked with long, aspen poles. These had been nailed in place and Johnny pried at one with his fingers. If he could get a pole out and find a crack just beside a loophole he could make it pretty tough for the man on the outside who tried to shoot through. That was his general idea. The chinking was nailed in tight and he had no luck prying. There ought to be some implement in the kitchen that he could use, he reasoned, and he crawled back to the lean-to door. The door was barred, which was strange. Johnny got it open and went in on his hands and knees. Shoving his hands cautiously before him he struck a body. Instantly his Colt was jammed into yielding flesh and he voiced a command:

"Hold it! That's a gun in your ribs!"

There was no answer. Johnny waited a moment, thumb tense on the slip hammer of his Colt, and then groped out with his left hand. Feeling over the body before him he encountered soft flesh. Johnny straightened up with shock. This was a girl!

All the matches in his trousers pocket were wet but there were a few dry ones inside his hat band. He secured one of these and lit it. In the flame he stared at Lois Redman, tied and gagged on the lean-to floor.

Johnny got the gag out first. He asked questions while he worked but they were not answered. He had seen that the girl's eyes were open but she was, for the moment, unable to talk.

When the gag was removed Johnny began to untie her hands.

"What you doin' here?" he demanded. "How'd you get here? Who done this to you?"

With the last question the girl's hands came free and she found her voice. "Fancy Cotter," she said weakly. "I'd come to warn him about the dam. Father couldn't rest until I did. I—"

"Why hell!" blurted Johnny. "Fancy Cotter, huh? Why—" He started toward the door.

"Don't!" said Lois Redman, sensing his intention. "Johnny! . . . Johnny!"

Johnny came back.

"I came up here and rode right to the cabin," Lois continued her story. "Fancy and Slim Blake and three others I didn't know were here. I told them what father had said and Fancy laughed and asked me to come in. I did. We got to talking and Fancy told me that he would hold the cabin and then they all laughed. They were about half drunk. I started to go and Fancy caught me by the arm. They talked about what they'd better do with me. I found out then that Fancy had sold out to the Long U. I got away from him and tried to run and they caught me again and tied me up and put me in here."

In the dark Johnny nodded. He could see what Fancy had meant to do. The possession of Lois Redman would have given him a whip to use over the nesters in the Willow Forks.

"Yeah," he said dryly, "I see."

"How did you get in here?" demanded the girl.

"I just come in," replied Johnny. "I got tired of jail an' all that, so I left."

"What did you come here for?"

"Because I got a crow to pick with several fellows," snapped Johnny. "Doggone it! I wish you was out of here!"

The girl got to her feet, Johnny recalled his errand and searched with groping hands for a tool. He found a hatchet in the wood box and took it up.

"You stay in here," he directed. "These fellows out in front ain't actin' very nice."

Armed with the hatchet he crawled back through the lean-to door.

The gloom in the cabin was lifting. The loopholes showed as lighter spots in the walls. It was growing light outside. Johnny crawled over and with the hatchet pried at an aspen pole. The pole came loose. There was a sizable chink between the logs left by the loose pole. Gun in hand Johnny waited. The gray of the chink darkened suddenly. Johnny stuck out his Colt and released the hammer. Outside a man screamed and the chink was light again. Score two for Johnny Weatherby.

He replaced the aspen and moved around the cabin. In the face of his counter attack, the attacking forces had drawn off. He could hear men talking outside. There were too many voices for only three men. Evidently reinforcements had arrived while he was in the lean-to. Johnny swore a little and stopped short when he found Lois Redman beside him.

"I told you to stay in the lean-to," he whispered fiercely.

The girl's voice, equally fierce, answered him. "Give me a gun!" she demanded.

Johnny made no move to obey and the girl crawled away. Presently he felt her presence again and reaching out his hand encountered the barrels of the shotgun. Lois had armed herself. Johnny, listening intently, whispered a warning. "That gun'll kick like the devil."

There was no answer.

A voice hailed from outside. "Hey, Weatherby!"

Johnny answered. He had placed the voice. "I hear you, Kenny."

"Come on out. We'll let you an' the girl go."

Johnny called his reply. "Go to hell, Kenny!"

"We'll take you an' it'll go mighty

hard with yuh both," Kenny shouted his threat.

Johnny was about to answer when the shotgun belched out through a loophole. There were yells outside and the sound of men moving hastily. Johnny heard a sniffle and moved toward it.

"You hurt?" he demanded.

"My nose." There were tears in Lois' voice. "It's bleeding."

"Don't let go both barrels at once," advised Johnny, then, crawling to the wall again he called. "Hey, Kenny. Let the girl go. She don't mean a thing to you."

Lois Redman said, "I won't go!" indignantly and Kenny called from outside.

"So she could get help, huh? Not much we won't!"

Johnny half lifted himself and peered through the loophole. It was growing rapidly lighter outside. Another ten or fifteen minutes and he'd be able to see.

Those ten or fifteen minutes constituted the immediate danger. There would be gunmen with Kenny, real gunmen. Perhaps Dirk Harbin was in the bunch. If Dirk was there to direct the battle it would be short and sweet. Fifteen or twenty men with Wade Kenny and Dirk Harbin to lead them against Johnny Weatherby. Well, it ought to be good. He'd find out if he'd earned his reputation, Johnny would.

Lois Redman spoke petulantly from across the cabin. "I can't find the shotgun shells," she announced. "Give me a Colt, Johnny."

So it wasn't Johnny Weatherby alone after all. There was another fighter in the little Hourglass cabin. Johnny couldn't keep the grin off his face. He stood up and walked over to the girl. "Here," he said, handing over a Colt. "You take this an' keep away from them loopholes."

The girl took the gun. "I'll need shells," she said.

Johnny went to the cupboard. He found shells there both for the Colt and the shotgun.

"Is your nose still bleedin'?" he asked as he passed over the box of forty-fives.

"No. It hurts though and I'll bet it's a sight. I wish . . ."

There was a solid thump against the door of the cabin and a hurricane of lead struck against the log sides. Bullets thudded into the logs, into the door, and clanged against the sheet iron shutters. Some found weak places in the chinking or cracked through the loopholes to drill across the cabin. From all sides the attack came.

Again came the solid smash at the door. Johnny, breaking the shotgun, slid two shells into the breach, clicked the gun shut and crawled toward the door. They'd try to batter that down, would they?

As he reached the door the bar creaked and groaned beneath another onslaught. The men outside were swinging a log, backing off and coming in with it at a run. So far three-inch planks and an oak bar had taken the shocks but they would not last much longer. Johnny Weatherby pointed the shotgun out of a loophole beside the door and pulled both triggers.

By rights he should have swept clean everything before the blasting muzzles of the gun but he did not. The attackers had backed off for a fresh charge and Johnny made a clean miss. He had failed to look before he shot and now he would pay for this carelessness. Again the men with the log charged in and this time the bar holding the door cracked and splintered. Johnny, rectifying his mistake too late, peered out of the loophole over the barrel of his Colt. It was light enough to see a little. He could make out the figures of the men along the sides of the log battering ram and the Colt in his hand spat at them. They were not far away, thirty

feet perhaps, and under the blast of that Colt they dropped the log and ran, those that were able. Two could not follow but dropped beside the weapon they had been wielding.

Johnny stuffed fresh shells into the Colt and turned, for from the far side of the cabin Lois Redman was firing as fast as she could cock the gun she held. With his Colt loaded Johnny ran across to her side and added his own fire, driving off men who were rushing the cabin. When that rush was driven back, both of the cabin's defenders had empty guns. The room reeked with powder smoke. Besides the graze along his arm Johnny had a fresh wound in the calf of his leg. Lois, miraculously, was untouched.

The firing outside had abated, for Kenny and the Long U men had drawn off.

Johnny yelled to the girl. "I told you to stay down! They'll try it again an' when they do—"

"Let them try it!" The girl's voice was defiant. "They're talking out there now, planning what to do next." She laughed a little, hysterically, and Johnny looked up from his task of wrapping a piece of rag around his leg.

There was some light in the cabin now, enough to see by. West, across the narrow valley, the tops of the hills were light. The time was perhaps four o'clock. Johnny got up from the floor and with the girl aiding him, dragged the heavy bulk of a wooden bed across the door to help the cracked bar.

When that was done he went to a loophole on the west side of the cabin and peered toward the dam. There were men on the dam, a good many men. Cursing to himself the fact that there was no rifle in the cabin, that his own short carbine was outside and that Fancy and his men had clung to their firearms when they left, Johnny looked out longingly. If he just had a rifle now, he could certainly cause a scatteration among the men on the dam. The range was long for a Colt, but, Johnny squinted carefully, not too long. He made a try and was rewarded by seeing a man in the group on the dam take two fancy steps and fall over the embankment. The group scattered to cover, hiding along the edge of the dam, sheltered by the bank.

CHAPTER VI

THE SHOWDOWN

Lois Redman came from the lean-to, carrying a bottle of whisky. She held it out to Johnny and he took a small drink. The liquor burned like fire in his stomach and sent blood surging through him. He had not realized before how tired he was.

He studied the embankment carefully and then went to a loophole further down the wall and looked out. He could see the clump of cedars where he had tied his horse, and called the girl to him.

"Look out here," he commanded. "You see that little bunch of cedars by the rocks?"

The girl looked out, then turned back and nodded. "I see them," she said.

"I got a horse in there," continued Johnny. "Now if you could slip out the back of the cabin an' get to him you could make it. He ain't no pet, Pansy ain't, but he can sure run. I'll keep them jaspers' heads down below the dam while you make a try at it."

"I'm not going." Lois' voice was very calm. "There's no use of talking, I won't go."

Johnny groaned. Of all the stubborn, hard headed— No! You had to hand it to this brown haired girl! She was all right!

"Listen!" he said. "You got to go. It's all the chance we got. If you can get help—"

There was a splintering crash on the door of the lean-to and back of the cabin a rifle cracked.

Lois Redman looked at Johnny and

actually smiled! "We're a little late," she said.

That was the weak point, the back of the cabin. There were no loopholes there, no thick pine logs to stop lead, no sheet iron shutters for the single window. Johnny knew it for a fatal weakness and he knew too, that the girl had spoken truly. There was no use trying to make a break now.

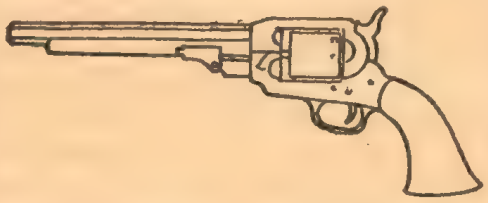
"Dog eat dog," he said grimly. "Well—"

He didn't complete his sentence but he was thinking that now it was up to Johnny Weatherby. Up to him to get the girl out and away. Guns were going from the embankment again. Johnny limped over to the door and began to pull away the heavy bunk. The girl watched him for a moment and then came across the room.

"What are you going to do?" she demanded.

"I'm goin' out there," announced Johnny Weatherby. "Listen, Lois, I think a lot of you. I reckon if things was different an' I was different—Well, let that go. Now you listen an' promise to do what I tell you. When I get clear there'll be some excitement. You get out of here. You make it to my horse an' you ride. The chances are you can get clear. It's me they want an' I'm goin' to give 'em a belly full. You better give me that other Colt."

The girl looked at the grim faced man before her. She read in his eyes the uselessness of argument. This was the Johnny Weatherby that she had heard of, this rock hard, fighting man. The careless boy who had flung himself at Fancy Cotter in her behalf was gone. This was Johnny Weatherby, gunhand. Very slowly she passed over the heavy, short-barreled Coyt.



Johnny took the gun. Automatically he half cocked it and opening the loading gate, spun the cylinder to see if the weapon was full. He performed a like service for the other weapon. Then, with the hammers of the guns down, he shoved one in the waistband of his trousers and turned toward the door.

Emboldened by the silence in the cabin, men were appearing on the dam once more. Johnny looked out the loophole by the door and nodded with satisfaction. If he could concentrate their attention on himself there was a chance of Lois' getting away. He lifted the cracked bar from its sockets and dropped it to the floor.

Behind him, in the cabin, Lois Redman cried, "Johnny!" softly, a catch in her voice. Johnny Weatherby looked back over his shoulder, grinned his flashing, sparkling grin, threw open the door and stepped out.

For a moment his appearance held the men on the dam. During that moment he ran ten feet. Then rifles crashed at him and lead tore by. Johnny ran a zigzag course. He had been hit, hard hit, in that first burst of fire but he had not stopped. At the edge of the dam a big man came up. Kenny! Johnny hardly knew that he did it but two slugs from his Colt tore into Kenny's middle, knocking him back, spinning him down behind the bank. Johnny panted on.

Other men, more cool than Kenny, lay flat on the ground and notched their sights, but a running, shooting man is hard to hit and besides his Colts Johnny carried a reputation, an awesome reputation.

His left leg went bad, buckling from a shot, and he dropped, only to stagger up again. The Colt in his hand was empty and he hurled it squarely into the face of a man who came up over the edge of the dam. He was at the dam now, almost on it, and the man he struck with the whirling Colt was Fancy Cotter. The other Colt came out of Johnny's waist band.

There were three slugs in him now,

one in his shoulder, one down along the ribs somewhere, and another in his leg. He laughed a little as he pitched forward. "Damned poor shooting! Damned poor . . ."

From somewhere behind him a hell of rifle fire arose and was echoed on the left. Men rose from behind the dam. Rose and ran but not toward Johnny Weatherby. He couldn't understand that. He wondered why they ran, wondered if Lois had gotten clear. Lois . . . It was tough to meet a girl like her when he was a man like he was. Mighty tough!

A horse thundered by him, a man leaning forward in the saddle and shooting ahead, his Colt rising and falling in short, chopping strokes. It looked like Les Brown. Les Brown, the one honest man in the sheriff's office. It couldn't be Brown though. Why, he'd left Brown handcuffed back in that little town, back in Piedmont. There were other riders coming in too. This was sure funny, damn' funny. Johnny shook his head to clear it. He couldn't understand these riders and he couldn't understand why he was alive. Ten or fifteen men and most of them with rifles and they'd let Johnny Weatherby live!

The shooting was further away now. It seemed to be less in volume and away over across the lake. Was that the way things were when a man checked out? All muddled up and crazy? It must be.

From Johnny's right a weak voice said, "Weatherby!"

The word cleared Johnny's head. He tried to get up, couldn't make it, tried to roll over and couldn't do that either. He could turn his head. Johnny was almost at the top of the bank. Across the bank from him was another man, Dirk Harbin. Harbin was flat on the ground, his face a mask of hate.

"Weatherby!" Harbin croaked again.

"It's me, Dirk," Johnny managed to get the words out.

"You got me, damn you, Weatherby." Harbin's voice was weak and rasping. "Through the lungs. I'm checkin' in. You are too."

Johnny laughed at that. It was funny. He and Dirk Harbin. Gunslingers! Hired hands and going out together. He saw Harbin's face changed from hatred to astonishment.

"You an' me, Dirk," Johnny managed.

"I can't git up," said Harbin.

"Nor me, Dirk."

"I'm goin' to kill you, kill you before I die!" Harbin's voice was a little shrill.

Johnny managed to squirm a little. The slope helped him and he slid so that he faced Harbin. They were not ten feet apart, the crest of the dam between them.

Johnny Weatherby laughed again, weakly. "I told you it had better be good if you dry-gulched me," he said. "Now, Dirk. You an' me. I'll count three."

"Count!" commanded Dirk Harbin. "Count, Weatherby!"

Johnny's gun was before him. He could see Harbin's head and shoulders. His voice faint, he began to count. "One— Two—"

Across the dam Dirk Harbin's gun roared. Treacherous to the last, Dirk Harbin. Johnny hardly felt the shock of the slug. All his waning concentration, all his will power was centered in his eyes and in his trigger finger. The hammer of the Colt was back. It fell and the gun leaped up off the sand. Again a weak thumb cocked the hammer and a weak finger pressed the trigger and again the gun leaped. Johnny couldn't see that the second shot whimpered across the Hourglass lake. He couldn't see Dirk Harbin's head, fallen on the sand. Couldn't see the man's shoulders twitch once and then relax. For Johnny Weatherby, Gunhand, the world was dark.

How long Johnny Weatherby was out of the picture he didn't know. He was unconscious when Les Brown and

his posse of Willow Forks men rode back from the pursuit of the Long U forces and it was Les Brown that found him.

Brown dropped down from his sweating horse and stood beside Johnny. Other members of the posse rode up and stopped. They sat their horses in a semi-circle around the deputy and the men on the ground. Brown scowled down at Johnny Weatherby.

"Well," he said slowly, "here's the hell raiser himself."

Bart Payne, sitting in the semi-circle shifted his eyes from Weatherby to Harbin and back again. Payne was reading sign.

"They finished each other off," he announced. "That's one good thing. Two damn' gun-slingers gettin' together this way makes less work for honest men."

Brown was still scowling. "I ain't so damn' sure," he said. "I ain't so damn' sure about Weatherby! Hell! If he'd a been a mind to he could have killed you, Tom, an' Redman too. For that matter he could of dropped me back at the courthouse. I don't get it!"

Johnny moved a little on the sand and with exclamations of surprise men dropped down from their horses. "He ain't dead!" Tom Arthur almost shouted.

Brown, breaking through the men about him, ran to the lake and filling his hat with water came back at a run. He shoved men aside and kneeling beside Johnny Weatherby, bathed his face with his wet neckerchief.

A flask was produced and handed to the deputy. Brown lifted Johnny's head, first gently turning the gunman on his back, and putting the flask to Johnny's lips, poured the potent red whisky down his throat. Laying the flask aside he stroked Johnny's throat. Johnny swallowed convulsively. More liquor followed the first drink. Johnny's eyes opened and rolled white. Gradually they focused. He stared up at Les Brown and tried to grin.

"What happened, Weatherby?" demanded Brown. "Can you talk?"

Johnny tried to speak and couldn't. Brown shook his head.

"We better get him to the cabin," he said. "Somebody'll have to go for Doc."

"Hell, let him lay!" Payne grunted profanely. "He ain't worth foolin' with. He—"

Payne's words had been stopped by a shout. At the edge of the group a cowman had turned and was pointing down the valley. Two horses with riders were coming at a long lope up the slope. One horse was buckskin and the other was a gray. The riders swung into the group and halted, dropping from their saddles. Lois Redman, letting Panny go, pushed through the men and ran to Johnny's side. She shoved Les Brown away, caught Johnny's head in her arms, and holding him so glared defiantly at the men about her. Gib Toliver, the sheriff, rode his gray horse almost through the circle, dismounted and advanced on Brown.

"What's goin' on here, Brown?" he snapped. "Who give you the right to organize a posse an' come out here?"

Brown, standing straight and facing the sheriff, was about to answer, but Johnny, his head in Lois Redman's arms, gathered a little life. His fire was not burned out yet. There was something in his head that drove him on.

"Gray . . . horse . . ." he said. "Redman's killer. . . ."

"What's that?" snapped Brown, wheeling from the sheriff. "What did he say?"

Lois Redman stared steadily at Toliver as she answered Brown's question. "He said that the man who shot my father rode a gray horse. There's just one gray horse here. . . ."

She broke off, for from some hidden reservoir Johnny Weatherby had summoned more strength. "Toliver—" he gasped. "Him an' Harbin—they

planned—to finish Redman— Tried to stop it— Tried—" Johnny's eyes closed.

About Gib Toliver hard eyed men closed in. Voices, low, harsh and accusing, spoke first from one side, then the other.

"He was ridin' his gray yesterday when Redman was shot," said Verne Grissom.

"Yeah, an' he was out of town when it happened!" That was Payne.

"Wagener elected him," snapped another man. "By Glory, Toliver, you better speak up!"

"What were you doing at the gate of the KR?" Lois Redman stared up at the ashen hued sheriff. "I want to know that. I'd ridden from here to get help. When Johnny went out of the cabin he gave me a chance to get away. I found Gib Toliver . . ."

The men about Johnny Weatherby had been so intent on the scene before them that they had not heard the rattle of approaching wheels. Now, for the first time their attention was called to a fresh arrival. A battered buckboard, drawn by two bay broncs, rattled up the road below the dam and stopped. A battered little man got out of the buckboard and advanced briskly, medicine case in hand.

Simultaneously several men said, "Here comes Doc," and on the ground Johnny Weatherby spoke once more.

"Fancy Cotter—" he panted. "He knows— Find—Cotter."

The false strength of the whisky burned out. Johnny's head lolled back in Lois Redman's arms. His eyes closed. Toliver, his face gray, turned as though to run. Half a dozen guns flashed out at him and Les Brown, his face puzzled, caught the sheriff's arm.

"You stand still!" he snapped. "Some of you fellows fan out an' see if you can find Cotter! Doc, come here an' work on this fellow. I'm goin' to get to the bottom of this!"

Men moved out at Brown's command. The sheriff stood trembling in Brown's grasp and the doctor, bending down over Johnny Weatherby, took his wrist in a professional grasp.

"Well," said the doctor cheerfully, "well now, his pulse isn't too bad. Let's move him to the house."

It was the third day after the fight at the Hourglass dam. Johnny Weatherby, weak and flat on his back in a cot in the Hourglass cabin, watched Lois Redman move about the replaced stove. The girl poured broth from a pan into a cup, tasted the hot fluid gingerly and taking up a clean spoon, advanced toward the bunk. For three days now Lois had been at the Hourglass cabin. Johnny couldn't understand that, what with her father hurt and all. It seemed to Johnny that Lois should have been with her father. He understood, in a dazed sort of way, that Kirby Redman was well looked after and out of danger.

The girl advanced with the cup of broth, seated herself on the edge of the cot, and spreading a napkin across Johnny's chest dipped into the broth with a spoon. The broth was hot; it burned his throat and Johnny's eyes watered.

"Too hot, Johnny?" questioned the girl.

Johnny nodded and Lois put the cup aside to cool a little.

"Does your shoulder hurt, Johnny?" asked the girl. "Doc said—"

Boots clumped on the steps to the door and Lois stopped her speech and turned. Johnny turned his head and eyes. Les Brown was coming into the cabin.

Brown dropped his hat on a chair and walked over to the bed. The deputy was smiling. Johnny grinned back. He thought perhaps that Brown had come to question him again. Johnny and Les Brown had struck up quite a friendship during the last day or two.

"How is father, Les?" Lois demanded, rising from the bunk.

"Comin' fine," replied Brown cheerfully. "I stopped in when I went past. We'll be able to move this fellow

down to the Open A in a day or two, Doc says, an' then you'll have 'em both together."

Lois took up the broth and moved over to the table. "I'll be glad of that," she said.

"Yeah," Brown nodded. The slow thinking deputy had something on his mind. He blurted it out.

"Say, Weatherby, it's cleaned up. Fancy Cotter broke down today an' told Morgan an' me all about it. Toliver's in jail an' there's a warrant out for Wagener."

"Yes?" said Johnny.

"Yeah. Fancy said that what you told us was right. He'd sold out to Wagener. Kenny was runnin' the show for Wagener here an' Toliver was in with 'em. The mornin' of the fight here Toliver had stopped at the Open A intendin' to finish off Redman. Arthur had come in for me after you'd been there but Doc's bein' there still, stopped Toliver. He come on toward the KR and Lois found him there when she rode for help. By Golly, Weatherby, I got to hand it to you. You had it figgered right."

There was satisfaction in Johnny's eyes but he said nothing. He had already told Les Brown all this as he had thought it out. Brown spoke again.

"With Harbin an' Kenny dead, Toliver in jail with Fancy Cotter an' a warrant out for Wagener, it looks like the little cowman's troubles are about over. It's cloudin' up to rain, too. Things sure look good."

Lois Redman came back with the cup of broth. "I think you've talked to Johnny enough, Les," she said. "We can't excite him too much yet. Have you had your dinner?"

Brown grinned at the girl. "I've had dinner," he answered. "I ate at the Open A. I just stopped by to tell Johnny the news." He walked over to the door and picked up his hat.

"I reckon I'll roll along," Brown announced. "I got business to 'tend to. So long, Johnny. So long, Lois."

Johnny grinned and Lois Redman, her cup poised, said, "Good by, Les," absently.

Brown stepped to the door, started out, and then stopped, grinning back over his shoulder. "Do a good job of holdin' down the Hourglass," he directed, and went on out.

Lois seated herself on the edge of the bunk again. She looked at Johnny Weatherby. Johnny returned the look. Gradually his thin lips parted in a smile. Reading deeply into the girl's eyes he had seen something that told him that he and Lois Redman would hold down a cabin together for the rest of their lives. The girl, meeting his look, blushed and turned her eyes away.

CURLY WOLF

THE STORY OF CLAY ALLISON

By

FRANKLIN REYNOLDS

Truly the gun-fighter came, as the old outlaw remarked, "from over where them winds come from!" The winds blew Clay Allison into the West from the state of Tennessee. He came a fully developed and handsome man. His eyes, as the eyes of most of the gun-fighters, were a sparkling blue. He stood well over six feet tall. His complexion was dark, and his hair, his moustache and beard were black.

"I knew him well in Fort Elliott, Texas," says the old-timer. "Clay rarely ever laughed but always wore a happy sort of smile even when he was killing. He had a crippled foot, having at one time shot himself with a pistol. When the weather was wet, he would limp, complain and use his Winchester for a crutch. I've had many a drink with him, and I never knew a finer man or one I'd rather be with. Clay was a good fellow."

True Feature of a Real Western Gun-Slinger

When but a boy he enlisted in the Army of the Confederate States. In the service he got his first taste of blood. A few years after the war he confided to a friend: "When I was a boy I never had any idea that I'd ever kill anybody. I was satisfied at home. My father was fairly well established in a financial way. Our family was happy and content. Then came the war. Our fortune was wiped out. I was restless and thought I'd go West where they told me a young man could do better." He laughed. "How much better I've done I don't know."

No man on the frontier was better known by sight or reputation than Clay Allison. He was more than a gun-fighter. He was something of a dare-devil, a demon. As a pistoleer among pistoleers he stood out like a clean ace in a dirty deck. Others were willing to take some chances, were willing to accept a little advantage, but not Clay Allison! He would take all the chances and asked that the advantages be given the other man. Sober, he was friendly, congenial and attractive. A fastidious dresser, he was always neatly, even severely, clothed in freshly starched white linen and black broadcloth. His boots were black with white buckskin stars and crescents stitched on them. His shell belts and pistol scabbards were of black leather laced with white buckskin. He had two favorite horses —one coal black and the other snow white. His saddle and headstalls were combinations of white and black leathers. Around his big black hat was a white band, and men said of him, to his back, "His skin's white, but his soul's as black as hell!" Clay Allison was a man of contrasts. Sober,

he possessed a dignity that few men dared retain in those frontier towns —but drunk, the contrasting natures of the man became more pronounced. Then, and not until then, he was a howling wild cat! For instance there is the time he entered the town of Canadian, Texas. Outside the town about one-half mile Clay rode into the shade of a mesquite clump. There he dismounted and proceeded to disrobe. Wearing only his gun-belts and hat, and mounted on his white horse, he rode into town pretty well "liquored up." A la Lady Godiva he rode into a saloon, up to the bar and had his drinks served to him on his horse. After drinking his fill, he emptied one of his six-shooters into an expensive piano and the other into the mirror behind the bar. No man disputed Clay Allison's right to take his fun as he found it, and he did it. Without interference he reloaded his guns, rode out of the saloon and galloped down the main street, firing into the air.

That night Allison returned to Canadian fully and immaculately dressed and entered the same saloon. Inside an itinerant evangelist was attempting to hold a meeting and convert the sinners. Allison handed him one hundred dollars saying: "Take this. I'm a hell'uva long ways past redemption, but maybe you can save somebody else."

In less than an hour Clay had killed an opposing player when he caught the man cheating in a poker game, and had hurried out of town "in a pile of dust a mile high."

He was a man of most peculiar but definite habits. On every Christmas and Fourth of July he would run the town of Las Animas, Colorado, up a tree and hold it there! He had been known to ride as far as two hundred miles to keep these appointments.

Early in the morning Clay would appear on the streets usually wearing four pistols. He would rake the town with gun-fire from one end to the other and then retire to a saloon for a quart of brandy. Every time he emptied a bottle, he would again appear on the streets and, as he expressed it, "fumigate the damn town with burning powder."

That he would do as he did was expected. Tradition made it his privilege. Peace officers steered clear of him on these occasions, and the citizens stayed indoors. "It was," they conceded, "Clay Allison's day, and the town was his!" Year after year he repeated this performance. The people of Las Animas spoke of his jubilation with the same pride that the citizens of El Paso pointed out "Two-Gun" Dallas Stoudenmire to strangers. He was the town itself on these days as much as Wild Bill Hickok was Abilene.

But even badmen have aching teeth. Allison was no exception. One morning after celebrating a July 4th, he awoke to learn that his head was aching, that his mouth felt as if it had been lined with a buffalo hide, and that a tooth was maliciously subjecting him to the pangs of the eternally cursed. His first port of call was the nearest saloon where he failed in an effort to float the tooth out of its socket with bad whiskey. He walked the floor in anguish, drove the other customers from the saloon, turned over the tables, broke chairs, raved and ranted —and suffered, more and more! The man who had the nerve to dare any odds, known or unknown, the man who was willing to match *his draw* against *the other man's drop* didn't have the nerve to buck that painful molar.

From a dental college in the East had come a Doctor White to settle in Las Animas. "He's a whackin' good tooth dentist," the bartender suggested with a smile.

"I'll find out about that," Clay countered.

Doctor White was not only "a whackin' good tooth dentist," he was a sterling American patriot. And while the celebration of his country's

independence he had engaged in the day before had not been as loud, or as dangerous, as Clay's, he had consumed his part of the liquid refreshments. The morning after the night before his hand was none too steady, his eye none too clear.

"Which tooth is it?" He questioned Allison.

Clay knowing nothing of reflex pains tapped the wrong tooth with the slender trigger finger on his right hand. Doctor White picked up the forceps, and he deftly extracted—the wrong tooth!

The patient discovered the error before he did. With a howl of rage Allison sprang from the chair, seized the dentist and pushed him down. Hell was to pay in that office then and there! With his knee in the dentist's stomach, the forceps in his hand, Allison reversed the procedure and pulled four teeth from his yelling victim!

"By rights," he admonished at the close of the operation, "I ought to kill you. But damn you! Somebody else might need a tooth pulled, and I hope I've taught you something!"

All Las Animas wondered why Clay Allison failed to kill. What afterwards happened about the aching tooth, the records do not disclose, but he and Doctor White did become fond friends.

A few nights after the episode in the office of Doctor White a goodly crowd had gathered in the Golden Wedding Dance Hall for a night of usual entertainment. Clay was there with his brother, John. Not long before Clay had, as a matter of accommodation, killed three badmen who had undertaken to run John out of the country. The brother felt indebted for the favor and was now ready and willing to assist Clay in the removal of any of the latter's enemies from all mortal things.

In the Golden Wedding Dance Hall was a very pretty young lady who called herself Magdalene Morgatza. From whence she had come none knew. That she was there was enough! But she was a woman of some culture and refinement and an accomplished soloist and musician. Too, she had talents in other directions. There was nothing about flirting that was not known to her. Golden hair and blue eyes, a softly crooning voice, silks and smiles—to Las Animas she was gorgeousness and splendor! The married women said she was a woman of the streets. The men regarded her as some sort of a queen, but whatever else, she was a remarkable woman. Equally as remarkable as Dodge came to regard Dora Hand.

Charles Faber was city marshal of the town. Feeling between John Allison and Faber was far from friendly. Toward Clay Allison no hostile move had ever been made on the part of the officer although all knew Faber was deeply and quietly resentful of the "run outs" that Allison made him take on the occasions when he treed the town.

The marshal was neglecting his duties in order to seek the favors of Magdalene. Rivaling him openly and boldly was Clay Allison, and, so rumor hath it, Allison was the favorite suitor at the court of the blond Venus.

When the Allison brothers entered the hall, Magdalene deserted Faber at the far end of the bar and rushed to meet them, throwing her arms around Clay's neck.

Thereupon, John Allison in deference to the truth of the old adage that "two's company and three's a crowd," sauntered off to join some acquaintances for a drink.

Clay and Magdalene were soon to be found together in a wine room to the rear of the dance floor.

Faber, bitterly resentful. was alone, standing at the bar swallowing great

gulps of whiskey. More sullen and silent than usual he emanated to the practiced eyes of the frontiersmen that trouble was brewing, moreover that it was soon due to boil!

Allison had friends. They were outnumbered ten or twenty to one by enemies. Men who were not openly antagonistic, but who secretly hoped that Allison would soon be carted out to Boot Hill to become but a memory.

Two of these walked up to the bar, one on either side of the marshal. One of them, Miguel Gonzales, said to the officer: "Damned if I'd stand for it if I was you, Faber. I'd get a shotgun, walk back there and fill his hide with blue whistlers. No jury in the world would convict you."

"That's the ticket," encouraged the other. "Dust him off. He's made you run like a rat a hundred times. Next he'll be runnin' you out of the country, and besides Magdalene is your girl, and he's got her back there now by himself lovin' her up. Hell, ain't you got no guts? Go back there and stop it with a shotgun. That's the ticket!"

For half an hour they plied the officer with more drinks and more advice. Finally they won their point, and Faber retired to his office where he loaded a double-barreled ten gauge shotgun with buckshot and small screws.

Clay and Magdalene were still in the wine room when Faber came back into the Golden Wedding. John Allison was just inside the door, and when he saw Faber stagger in with the shotgun, he guessed, correctly, at what the man had in mind. But John Allison had been drinking. His hand was heavy and his draw was slow. He called to Faber to drop the cocked shotgun, at the same time reaching for his six-shooter. Faber emptied both barrels of buckshot and screws into John's arm and side. Then like a man gone *loco* he rushed back to the rear of the establishment, pistol in hand.

Clay Allison had not been disturbed by the roar of the scatter-gun. Nothing could have disturbed him there in the arms of the voluptuous lady of pleasure. Her lips were pressed to his, the hour was brief and life was sweet, and—well, Clay Allison could hear guns roar any old time! For once in his life gun-fighting was not interesting.

He heard Faber enter the little room and arose, sombrero in hand. The marshal had the drop on him and was squeezing the trigger. Then Clay Allison, quicker than a flash, did a miraculous thing. He threw that hat straight and full into the marshal's face. The hat disconcerted the officer and caused him to flinch. He missed his man-sized target. Clay drew his gun and killed!

A month passed and court convened. Word came to Clay that the first thing to be investigated by the Grand Jury was the killing of Charles Faber. The news disturbed him not the least. He simply went into action and called on the gentleman who presided over the court.

"Judge," said Clay, "I've never been on a jury. I've lived in this county a number of years and have always wanted to serve as a juror. I believe it is the duty of every good citizen to serve." He was smiling. Then his hand slid down to the butt of his six-shooter, and his eyes glittered. "I think," he remarked slowly, "that you ought to appoint me as foreman of the Grand Jury!"

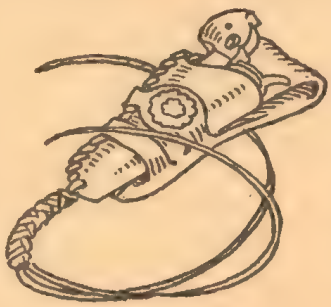
The jurist was impressed. "Yes, yes, Mr. Allison," he stammered in fear, "by all means, yes, Mr. Allison, it shall be done. You shall be foreman of the next Grand Jury. I'll attend to that at once."

"Thank you, Judge, I'll try to make you a damn good foreman." Clay continued to smile. They discussed the weather and cattle and other things. When he was preparing to leave, Clay turned to the jurist again, "By the

way, Judge, I'll bring the rest of the Grand Jury with me. There won't be any use for you to send out after any other men."

The sessions of the next Grand Jury in Las Animas were held mainly in the Golden Wedding Dance Hall. Clay Allison presided with Magdalene Morgatza on his lap most of the time. The other eleven congenial souls were cowboys from the Allison Ranch and other and friendly gun-fighters. The best of foods and rarest of wines were served the jurors. No indictments were returned, and a good time was had by all. At the end of the week the Judge sent Clay word that he was ready to adjourn court and that it was time for the Grand Jury to adjourn. Clay answered by appearing in open Court and insisting that the term be continued until he was ready to adjourn the inquisitorial body. The Court acquiesced and for another week the session of the Allison Grand Jury flourished in unabated hilarity!

Incidentally he didn't even bother to vindicate himself. Where the money went none knew, but the expense of that Grand Jury was in excess of ten thousand dollars, and when he did decide that he should adjourn, he announced it by riding his horse into the courtroom and shooting four holes in the ceiling.



In less than a year he moved to what is now Oklahoma and established a ranch on the Washita River. He now became known as "The Curly Wolf of Washita!"

During the Fall and Winter of 1873-74 Allison was in and around the village of Cimarron, New Mexico. Here he met an old acquaintance, Jack Chunker. This man, a Texas desperado, had already killed some fifteen or sixteen men and regarded himself as something of a ring-tailed whizzer with red-striped wheels. He boasted that they could dig a grave in Boot Hill because he was going to prepare Allison for it, *pronto*.

Word of his boasting was carried to Allison, who was on his way to supper. The Washita rancher went out and located Chunker.

"Hello, Jack," he greeted the man who had threatened his life. "Let's get some supper!"

Chunker was too surprised to excuse himself.

The waiter appeared to get their order, and both ordered large meals. During the course of the dinner Chunker dropped a spoon to the floor. In retrieving it he made the mistake of unnecessary maneuvers. Clay's bullet struck him between the eyes, and the dead man fell forward with his head on the table top. A small rivulet of blood trickled toward Clay's plate. It failed to disturb him as he sat there finishing his meal and telling jokes to the dead man. For this killing he was tried and acquitted because, according to Joe Rinehart, then Sheriff of Cimarron, he was able to prove that Chunker was trying to get a six-shooter out of his lap with which to kill Allison. This trial was held some time later, however. Immediately following the killing and after finishing his meal Allison arose to leave the restaurant.

At the front door he met Benito Pancho, the city marshal, who undertook to arrest him for killing Chunker. The officer was caught unawares in *not* knowing that the man he was seeking to arrest was Clay Allison! Pancho was under the impression that he was going after an average badman. That he was attempting to corral the Ace-High-Straight-Flush of gun-fighters was news to him—carried to him after they took him home to recuperate from the dose of lead poisoning Clay had dished out for him.

Allison made his way to his horse and left town. A posse was organized

to pursue him. Knowing what trail he had taken, three members of the posse took a short cut unknown to Allison. Concealing themselves in the brush they awaited his coming When he was so near they were positive they could not miss him all three fired. Clay Allison tumbled from his horse wounded. After a casual examination, and not getting *too* close to their *dead* man, the three possemen mounted and rode away. Allison afterwards hunted them up, one by one, and killed them. One he notched his gun for in Tombstone, one more in Cheyenne, and the other in Fargo. Clay Allison took long rides to pay some debts!

Sheriff Rinehart told another story on himself. He was once given a warrant and sent out to arrest Clay. When he produced the warrant, Allison took it, tore it to bits and threw the pieces in the officer's face. "Then he took my hat," said Rinehart, "and after filling it with muddy water made me put it on. I returned without Clay." The old officer laughed good-naturedly.

Then a company of Negro soldiers under the command of a white lieutenant were sent after Allison. He answered their demands by saying: "I'm not going to surrender to any damned nigger soldiers. If you want me, send the niggers on ahead of us, and I'll go in with you."

The soldiers were sent ahead. Clay kept his guns while riding beside the officer. Several miles from Cimarron they saw a dead skunk in the road. Clay made the officer dismount and get the skunk. When they rode into town, the lieutenant still had the skunk on the saddle before him.

One fine morning Allison breezed into the wide-open, hell-roaring town of Dodge. Bat Masterson and Wyatt Earp were there. A fellow by the name of Peters was there, too. This man, Peters, no less than a hundred times, had expressed the intention of killing Clay Allison the first time they met, for some fancied wrong inflicted on him by John Allison, who had survived Charles Faber's shotgun charge and joined the Stockton outlaw gang over in Colorado.

Allison and Peters met. Without difficulty Allison took Peters' belt gun and ushered his would-be enemy into a saloon for a drink. Allison planned to dissuade the man and send him on his way. "I had known him for years," Allison said, "and I knew he wasn't right in the head. I didn't want to kill him." For almost an hour the men drank and argued. Then a friend of Allison's approached their table and spoke to Clay. While Clay was shaking hands with the new arrival, Peters flashed out a derringer. His bullet struck Clay's belt buckle and glanced. Clay's two bullets were buried deep in Peters' heart! Allison ordered the body removed and paid the expenses of the burial.

Despite the fact that both Masterson and Earp harbored the ambition to "lord it" over all other gun-fighters on the Chisholm Trail and in the trail towns, and represented themselves as dutiful law enforcement officers, and were nearby, and knew that Allison had killed Peters—he was permitted, later in the day, and at his convenience, to ride out of town.

Not many days later he received word that Wyatt Earp had made the statement, after his departure from Dodge, that "if Clay Allison ever comes back here again, I'll hand him a ticket to Boot Hill."

"You go back and tell that yellow-bellied Earp that I'm coming!" Allison ordered his informant.

As soon as he could make arrangements for the sale of a herd of cattle, Allison returned. He hit Dodge "all spraddled out!" It was early morning. Allison, like the Indians, preferred this time for his fighting. First he went to Earp's favorite saloon and sat down at a table with his back to the wall. On the table before him was a six-shooter!

Wyatt Earp knew he was there. Bat Masterson and more than a dozen others of the squad of shotgun killers had been posted in advantageous places with shotguns and rifles. Clay Allison was not to be given a chance. That was the order.

Allison went out into the street and into other resorts. Always, everywhere, he inquired for Wyatt Earp. Returning to the first place he had entered he amused himself playing poker for a while and then started out again. As he swung back the doors to step out on the board sidewalk he met Earp, face to face.

"There you are," Allison smiled. "I got your message a few days ago, and I've been looking for you everywhere. Well, Earp, damn you, draw!"

"There's something wrong, Clay," Earp protested. "I don't understand." He was paling before the wilting glare of Allison's eyes.

"Earp, you're a damned liar! You sent me word you were going to kill me. Now slap your leather!"

Wyatt Earp refused to attempt to draw a gun. For half an hour Clay Allison stood before him and roundly cursed him with every vile and profane epithet he could muster into language. Across the street shotgun and rifle muzzles were trained on Allison. Earp knew that Allison could not get away, that he would be killed, and Earp knew, too, that no matter what happened, or how, Allison would get him. Clay Allison knew what he was going up against. He knew he would die in the first blast. But he was willing to go and take Earp with him! Earp was not willing to take a chance.

Two hundred men had witnessed the play. Allison knew well that word would go up and down the trail that he had made Earp "crawfish." He was satisfied and although he wanted, more than anything else in the world, to kill Earp, he was, at the same time, unwilling to kill a man who would not resist! A coward who would not fight back! A coyote who would not back up his word!

Allison then got drunk, very drunk, and rode up and down the streets shooting and yelling. Not a man raised a finger against him. Dodge smiled and welcomed him. He had made Wyatt Earp show his hand—a hand that was empty.

After amusing himself in Dodge for a few days Allison went back down the trail to Texas.

Allison's day came, unexpectedly and most uniquely. Not many years passed before Clay left the Washita and settled on Seven Rivers. Not many miles from a ranch owned by a kinsman was a combination saloon and store. One afternoon Allison went to this place and got drunk. The idea occurred to him that it would be a fine thing if he killed this kinsman, who was afraid of him and had been hiding whenever Allison was near. What the trouble was between them no man could say, and none would guess.

Toward dark Allison mounted his black horse and started up the road on his mission of death. On the way he overtook a wagon heavily loaded with lumber. Realizing that his intended victim would expect him on horseback, he thought his best bet would be to take, and use, the wagon. He did. He had brought his jug along. The road was rough. The wagon lurched. Allison was drunk and not as good a mule-skinner as he was gunfighter, and, he fell off and beneath the wheels!

There on a lonely country road he died the ignominious death of being crushed by wagon wheels!

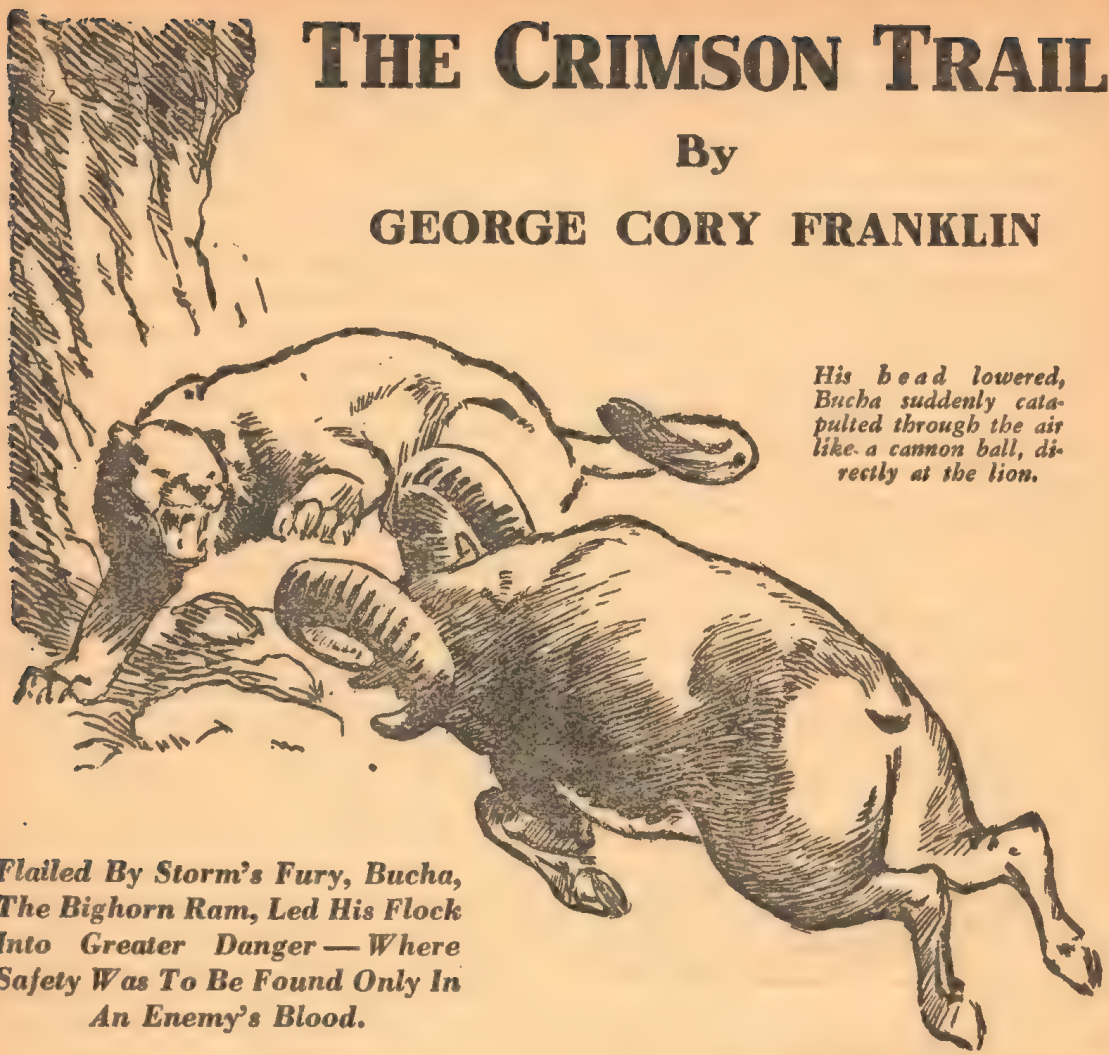
Hardly a fitting and proper death for a top-hand gun-slinger who carved twenty-two notches on his gun handles! Queer are tricks fate plays!

"Why in the hell," remarked his brother, John, "couldn't he have gone out under a cloud of powder-smoke!"

THE CRIMSON TRAIL

By

GEORGE CORY FRANKLIN



His head lowered, Bucha suddenly catapulted through the air like a cannon ball, directly at the lion.

Flailed By Storm's Fury, Bucha, The Bighorn Ram, Led His Flock Into Greater Danger — Where Safety Was To Be Found Only In An Enemy's Blood.

Bucha, the bighorn ram, stamped one foot nervously on the ground as though he instinctively felt that danger threatened his band. Not that Bucha was by any means cowardly, but creatures who have won leadership become conscious of their responsibility and learn to be alert.

Just below the rocky point on which Bucha stood, a band of fifty ewes, several smaller rams and the year's increase of lambs were awakened by Bucha's warning and sprang to their feet, ready on the instant to follow the big leader wherever he might choose to go.

Bucha turned his nose into the red of the morning sky. His golden eyes narrowed in an attempt to confirm the taint of cat odor that had aroused him. It was the extreme danger point of the day for the flock. The mountain lions that skulked up from their dens on the cliffs would be hunting along the ridges now, watching for an opportunity to separate an unwary sheep from the flock and make a kill. This was what Bucha was guarding against.

Beside the ever present threat from the big cats that preyed upon his flock, Bucha sensed another danger. Last night's sun had sunk behind a screen of vivid color in the west. This morning the air was mild as a June morning, instead of late October. The thick mass of coarse, hairy wool which protected the two-inch sheath of tallow covering Bucha's

muscles had become uncomfortably warm during the night, and the ram knew that a radical change in the weather was on the way.

Not that he cared in the least for cold or snow. The wild array of beetling crags beneath the crest of I-X-L Mountain meant home and protection to Bucha, and a blizzard whining among the rocks would be sweetest music to him. But the lambs and yearlings could not stand the rigors of a winter above timberline and must be taken down Cataract gulch to the valley of the Lake Fork of the Gunnison, and it was this that worried Bucha now.

Up here at the edge of the flat top of I-X-L the rams of the flock could defend the weaklings against the attacks of the flesh-eaters much more easily in summer time than they could down in the forests or in the mountain meadows of the valley. Besides the danger from the mountain lions, lynx and wolverines of the lower altitudes, there were trappers who sometimes risked the penalty of a five hundred dollar fine if discovered with the flesh of a bighorn in their possession.

All these things had to be taken into consideration by the leader of the bighorn flock, and Bucha had been wonderfully successful. Only three times during the past two years had members of his band felt the sting of hot lead or the tear of sharp fangs, and this immunity from danger was the result of the keen intelligence and the alert watchfulness of the seven-year-old leader with the immense horns, which made a complete circle on either side of his head.

Second only to the beaver in ability to plan for the future, the bighorn is as capable of quick decisions as is the grizzly, and while Bucha realized that soon, probably this very day, he must lead the flock away from the protection afforded by the high altitude and rough country on I-X-L, he did not hesitate to act on the immediate problem.

A sharp, commanding "B-a-a-a" brought three of the older rams to his side. One of these at once leaped upon the lookout point that Bucha vacated and became the sentinel for the flock. The other two flanked Bucha, though standing slightly to the rear, as non-coms might have acknowledged the rank of an officer.

Bucha gave a parting survey of the now thoroughly aroused band and then trotted off in the direction from which the fetid cat smell had come, the other two rams keeping their exact positions on either side of him.

No flesh-eater, not even the sharp-clawed cougar, cares to face three angry bighorns, and the mountain lion crouched behind a rock a hundred yards to the east of the flock glanced back of him to make sure that his line of retreat was open, when Bucha and his supporters appeared on the ridge above him.

The disgusting odor of the lion was now strong in the nostrils of the defenders of the flock. They knew that the blood-thirsty killer crouched behind a little patch of scrubby buckbrush forty yards from where they stood. Having located their enemy, the three rams moved quickly and with well-planned precision.

Bucha walked forward slowly, his magnificent horns held low, his massive hindquarters tense, ready to launch his body into the air with the force of a catapult. The other two, diverging at acute angles from a common point, dashed to the right and left of the brush behind which lay the long tawny body of the spitting cat.

The lion had not expected this at all. Never before in all the years he had preyed upon the grass-eaters of the high country had the fight been carried to him in any such bold manner. Often he had been driven away, defeated in his attempt to kill a lamb, but never until now had he been attacked in the open. The big cat was

perfectly aware, however, of the danger of being hit by one of those enormous heads, impelled by the low-swung, heavy body of an enraged ram, and he had no intention of being trapped between three such warriors.

Snarling with disappointed rage, the lion sprang lightly in the air and turned to run across the open mesa which is here three hundred yards in width. He ran with easy, graceful bounds, his long tail held straight up in the air. Tufts of grass, loosened by his short claws, tossed behind him.

The sight of the ancient enemy of his kind in full flight stimulated Bucha's desire for revenge. He tore after the lion at a speed which forced the cat to run his best. At the same time the two rams on the sides closed in so that now the lion was being forced to run in a direct line towards the edge of the mesa. It is unlikely that the rams had taken into their plans the one thousand foot sheer drop on this side of I-X-L when they had engineered the attack, but the lion did as he neared the edge of the precipice, with three angry sheep heading him directly toward certain death.

He strove with all the power in his body to get past the ram on his right. Failing in this he made a sudden stop, whirled in the air, cuffing at Bucha's head with a foot on which knife-like claws, two inches long, were extended to their full limit.

Quick as the lion's action had been, Bucha had a trifling advantage in point of time. He turned his head slightly so that the lion's claws cut raking furrows only at the base of one corrugated horn, but Bucha did not slacken his speed. He launched his body forward, with all the power of his massive muscles, struck the lion squarely and knocked him rolling towards the edge of the cliff.

The lion, now as badly scared as a dog-chased tabby-cat, regained his feet barely in time to escape a second blow, leaped clear over Bucha's back and ran like a cottontail for the nearest patch of scraggly timberline juniper.

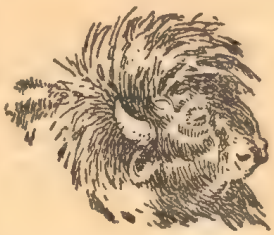
Bucha and his escort lined up exactly as they had been when they started their offensive, only now they appeared to be twice their ordinary size. Every hair on their bodies stood stiff, turned toward their heads. Their mouths forced open by their strenuous efforts in the thin air at an altitude of twelve thousand feet, made them appear like ferocious demons ready to bite, rather than inoffensive grass-eaters. At any rate the lion had lost his present appetite for lambs, and keeping his movements hidden by the protecting juniper, he bellied low against the short grass and made his way to the nearest break in the cliff, down which he crept to a narrow place on a shelf below, out of reach of the enraged rams.

Bucha's fighting blood was up. Having licked the most dreaded enemy of his band, he was keen for further adventure. He was well aware that a storm was coming. Very soon a blizzard would sweep across the unprotected barrens. Why not start for the lower valley now? Had he not just routed a full-grown cougar? Why should he be afraid of any of the threatened dangers of the trail? He knew that the lion had taken refuge on the shelf, and in his present excited condition he was tempted to follow; possibly he might have done so but for the sudden gust of wind that swept across the mesa bringing stinging icy particles of snow from the gulches.

The threat of a storm decided him. He turned back toward the place where he had left his flock. An old ewe who had been looking longingly down into the valley three thousand feet below was the first to respond, and came close to Bucha. Another stepped up beside her. The two rams that had supported Bucha's fight took their places on either side confirming the judgment of the leader. The line

was extended. In three minutes the annual migration to the winter range had begun, and none too soon. Already the temperature had dropped twenty degrees. The air was filled with snow, and around the cliffs the wind shrieked with the mournful warning of the original siren whistle.

The lion, disgusted with life in general and, like all the cat family, hating wet and cold, wanted nothing so much now as to get down off the mountain. He climbed back and reached the edge of the mesa shortly after Bucha had led his band down along the first narrow ledge above the cliff. In a blinding storm a better chance might offer to kill a lamb, so the cat followed a considerable distance behind the flock, his eyes green with the lust to kill; his huge padded paws covering the tracks made by several sheep with each step.



Bucha had traveled this trail twice each year since he was a tiny lamb. He knew every hiding-place where an enemy might lurk, and took care to examine each one before permitting the ewes who crowded close behind him to approach the spot. Many times in the past this trail had been crimsoned with the blood of his kind, and today Bucha was more than ordinarily careful because of the known presence of a lion on the mountain top.

The first two shelves had been safely passed and the big ram felt more secure. The wind lost much of its power here against the face of the precipice. When a lull came Bucha could see a dark splotch on the mountainside far below. This he knew to be a forest of spruce. If he could succeed in leading his band under the protection of those thick branches, they would be safe from the blizzard. Food would be abundant. The rest of the way down the valley might be made by easy stages, therefore the forest was Bucha's first objective. The distance from the top of the mountain to the timber below was not more than a mile, only a few minutes' trot if there were no obstacles in the way.

On the sheer face of the mountain, fractures filled with softer rock had been eroded into a series of narrow cañons. Into these the snow and ice is packed by the wind and does not melt until late in the summer, so that from June until September the letters I-X-L appear plainly to the sight of anyone in the valley below.

The trail down which Bucha led his flock crossed these ice-filled fractures almost in the exact center from left to right. In the crack which formed the "I" Bucha encountered no obstacle. At the "X" he found the snow could be bucked out of the trail, and he quickly made a path through it for his followers. But at the last crevice he came to the one thing which, outside of a perpendicular cliff, can block the progress of a bighorn.

The crack was filled with blue glare ice, formed by the freezing of water that had run down from the spring on the mountainside and presenting an impassable barrier twenty feet wide, sloping downward on a grade upon which even the sure hoofs of a bighorn could not hold.

Bucha was stuck! Behind him strung a long line of bighorns as helpless as himself. For the band to turn back to the blizzard-swept mountain top meant death. Above them a wall of rock rose perpendicularly for two hundred feet. Below the precipice was broken up in a series of shelf-like benches too far apart for any animal to reach by jumping from one to the other. Of course Bucha did not know that the cat had followed behind him and so he was ignorant of this added menace to his band.

The incident of the fight with the mountain lion was forgotten in the presence of certain death from starvation or an avalanche of snow sweep-

ing down from the heights above. The other rams became impatient because of the long halt and crowded past the ewes and their offspring until a dozen of them stood on the brink of the ice-filled gorge and pondered the certain death that awaited them.

One of the more venturesome attempted to cross the ice. His feet slipped from under him and with a pathetic bleat of terror he shot down the mountainside and went sailing out over a high cliff to light, a little broken patch of gray-and-tan, on the slide rock far below. The others, taking warning from this, backed up, holding the ewes and the whimpering lambs away from this blue death.

This change of position left the rear of the flock unguarded, and the lion found the opportunity, for which he had been hunting throughout the morning, ready to his hand. An impatient yearling turned back and attempted to climb the cliff above the trail. The lion made a quick dash, sprang up and dragged his victim down. One slash with the long sharp fangs, a few useless struggles on the part of the yearling, and the murderous beast was feasting on the warm flesh of his kill.

Because of their interest in the problem before them and the roar of the blizzard none of the defenders of the bighorn band knew the fate that had befallen the yearling. Surely this was a bad beginning; in the first half hour the trail had claimed two victims and, unless a miracle should happen, the entire flock would perish at the edge of the glare ice.

In vain Bucha and the other rams sought some solution of the problem. They stood looking out over the patch of ice, for once absolutely helpless to either go forward or back, trapped as completely by the elements as though they were enclosed in a cage of steel bars.

The lion gorged himself to repletion on the tender flesh of the yearling and lay down in the trail. He could not understand why the flock had stopped, but he knew he was a decidedly uncomfortable cat. The snow was piling up around him and he wanted more than anything else to reach a refuge in the timber below and sleep off his gluttony. He went closer to the band that had now crowded up into a compact mass behind its leaders.

Had the lion not already been stuffed until he could not swallow another mouthful he might have killed as many of the helpless ewes and lambs as he had cared to strike down, which is exactly what he would have done had the weather been fine. As it was he sat on his haunches in the trail and studied the squirming mass in front of him.

Bucha and the other rams had braced themselves and were holding the band back away from the danger. Several patches of snow were beginning to hold on the ice; if they should freeze and form a foundation on which the falling snow might build, perhaps the place might be crossed yet. There was little encouragement, however, because as soon as the snow gained a little weight, a gust of wind would start it and it would slide down over the cliff.

It was now past midday and the storm was increasing in fury every minute. The ewes were prodding the rams with their short horns, urging them to go on. The rams, fully alert to the impossibility of crossing the ice, held back, taking the unjust punishment uncomplainingly.

The lion, disgusted by all this foolishness, went back up the trail past the place where he had killed the yearling, hunting for some break where he might work his way down to a lower shelf and so get by the milling sheep. He plowed through the rapidly deepening drifts for several hundred yards before he gave up in disgust and retraced his steps to the huddled flock beside the icy gorge.

By this time the ewes had crowded

up until the rams had but a yard or two left between them and certain death. Suddenly with a shriek calculated to paralyze every bighorn in the flock, the lion bounded onto the backs of the ewes and attempted to cross this living bridge.

Instead of cowering with terror, Bucha whirled and, rearing on his hind legs, struck the oncoming lion squarely on the breast, hurling the big cat back among the terror-stricken ewes, who struggled back up the trail, stampeding behind one or two young rams that had not been able to get up in front with the patriarchs of the band, and now by a strange accident had become the leaders of the band.

Snarling, hissing, striking at anything that came within reach of his terrible paws, the lion soon cleared the space of the remaining rams, who ran up the trail, following the flock to temporary safety. The killer was not to be permitted to go unpunished, however, for the instant Bucha saw him crouch in the snow, he charged, butting him against the cliff with such force as to injure the spine of the cat.

Following up this advantage, Bucha ripped the tough hide along the lion's belly with the end of one horn. Had he kept up the close in-fighting, the lion might never have been able to rise up again, but as Bucha backed away for another rush after the manner of angry bighorns, the lion struggled out onto the ice beyond the packed snow. The damp, hairy forepaws of the great beast clung to the ice, and he did not slip to his death as the bighorn had done, but worked his way out to the center of the dangerous spot, dragging his hind parts and leaving a smear of blood on the ice, to which the swirling snow instantly began to cling.

Bucha did not pursue the lion beyond the safety of the snow, but stood shaking his enormous horns and threatening him by stamping his feet. The lion, bleeding badly from the wound Bucha had given him, dragged his body a yard at a time to the farther edge of the ice, and then on down the trail leading toward the timber. Bucha stood still, watching the wounded lion gain the safety he coveted for himself and his flock. He turned to see where the rest of the band had gone. Not one was in sight. All had deserted him.

Except for two deep gashes cut in his neck, Bucha was unhurt. He had no intention of permitting the band to go back to the top of the mountain. He started up the trail but had only a few yards to go before he came upon the flock huddled between the terror behind them and the bloody carcass of the yearling killed by the lion, which had been left lying across the trail.

Bucha, born leader that he was, at once took command and by his example inspired sufficient courage to cause the band to follow him back to the gorge. On the foundation of the lion's blood a line of frozen snow a foot wide stretched across the ice. Bucha could not understand by what miracle it had appeared but it certainly looked like a possible trail. At least he would attempt to cross.

Very carefully he placed one hoof on the snow and eased his weight upon it. The snow gave a little under his weight, but it held. Little by little he made his way across and stood on the solid ground, looking back at the band. One of the two rams that had fought beside Bucha in the morning, followed. With each succeeding passage the trail became safer for the others.

All the rams crossed safely, then the ewes and finally the little lambs came bobbing across like a lot of jackrabbits. When they were over Bucha again took the lead and started down toward the timber. He was thoroughly alert now, and trotted but a few steps each time before turning to look back and make sure that no new danger threatened.

The smell of the wounded lion en-

raged him. He of course could not have known that his own courage in attacking the lion when all the rest of the band had fled, had resulted in the forming of the crimson trail, over which they had passed to safety. If he could have in any way avoided the evil odor of the trail he would certainly have done so, but there was nothing else to do but to go on down the slope.

The horror of the blood-stained snow offended the other members of the band, and they kept attempting to turn off, breaking out of line and trying to break new trails for themselves, each according to his fancy. This did not meet with the approval of the leader. Former experiences warned him that here in the forest danger lurked, behind the trees and down-timber, and his hereditary instincts impelled him to keep the band together in close formation, if he could. Several times he stopped and signaled to some wandering ewe to come back into line. Once he ran after a stubborn yearling and butted him over in the snow; after this the line was not broken so frequently.

Down here the snow was deeper than on the wind-swept mountain top, but the temperature was higher. The lambs filled their bellies with hot milk whenever and wherever opportunity afforded, and began to romp under the trees. Other members of the flock felt the urge to play, and a series of snow battles were staged. This did not interest Bucha, he had serious business ahead of him and was still anxious for the safety of the flock.

No matter how badly the lion might be wounded he was unquestionably alive, or his body would have been found in the trail. A live lion is always dangerous to a bighorn, therefore, Bucha progressed slowly, studying each spot where the lion might be hid and even looking up into the overhanging branches before he led the way beneath them.

The new snow had covered the rocks and logs to such an extent that familiar objects appeared to be twice their actual size. A windfall in front of him caused Bucha to seek some way to go around it, but huge drifts prevented. The wind was now at his back so that he was unable to scent danger ahead. He moved forward slowly, stamping angrily on the snow, telling the whole world how tough he was; and it wasn't all bluff. Just now Bucha was a bad actor. He might be afraid, but if there was anyone watching him he would not have suspected it.

The flock, anxious to go farther down into better feed, pressed close behind Bucha, making it impossible for him to retreat in case of an attack. Cautiously Bucha moved in between the fallen logs. Too late he saw his mistake. The lion had been unable to drag himself farther and, with the instinct of his kind, had turned to face his back trail. The drifting snow caught between the logs had covered his tracks so that Bucha did not see the cat until one huge paw shot out, raking along the side of Bucha's jaw and down his shoulder.

The pain and scent of his own blood changed Bucha into a veritable fighting demon. He charged the lion with all the power of his range-hardened muscles, struck him on the shoulder and backed away for another rush. The lion glanced behind him, looking for some possible means of escape.

Bucha did not paw the snow as a bull would have done nor did he make any sound. His head lowered to the exact angle for the most effectual thrust, and suddenly his body was catapulted through the air like a cannon ball, directly at the crouching form of the lion. Boxing skillfully with both paws the lion struck low to avoid the horns of the ram and his sharp claws ripped the flesh within

an inch of the jugular vein of the bighorn.

Bucha's blow had failed to crush the lion between the logs. He sprang backward, avoiding the second short-arm blow of the lion, and rushed again, this time protecting his throat by holding his horns lower.

The lion as quickly changed his manner of fighting and, raising himself as high as he could, snapped at the exposed neck of the ram, tearing a mouthful of hairy wool from the bristling shoulders.

There had been a double action to Bucha's thrust. The sharp ends of the horns that had made a complete circle were now against the belly of the screeching cat. His head came up with a lightning-like jerk and completely gutted the lion. This time Bucha did not back off but put every ounce of strength in his short, low-swung body into a terrific push, actually crushing the body of the lion against the logs and holding it there.

Had the lion now been able to use his hind legs he would have ripped the ram's body open in a dozen places, but held as he was, with his front paws fanning the air ineffectually above Bucha's shoulders, his fangs breaking on the massive horns, the lion, still snapping and screaming, was literally squeezed to death.

Not until the body of the big cat had ceased to quiver did Bucha relax the pressure, even then as he backed slowly away, he was in exactly the correct position for another thrust if it should prove to be necessary.

Bucha heard the thudding of hoofs behind him and the crash of breaking saplings as five rams, attracted by the sound of the fighting came rushing to his assistance. They lined up beside the leader and stood looking at the dead lion, snorting with terror as they smelled the blood and saw the broken yellow body stretched on the crimson snow.

Bucha ate a mouthful of snow in order to cool the fever of his blood, gave a scornful snort of defiance to the entire cat tribe and led the way on down the mountain toward a side-hill where he had wintered the year before.

Above the flock the blizzard roared and tore at the cliffs and crags of I-X-L. Here in the forest the snow fell softly. Bucha hunted up a patch of rich grass, pawed the snow away and feasted contentedly, absolutely sure of the present safety of his flock.

A HARD LESSON

It happened in Galeyville, Arizona, now a ghost town, and is within the memory of J. C. Hancock, recently postmaster of Paradise, Arizona.

Cherokee Jack had been forced by Curly Bill, that then rip-roaring old gun-fanner, to return a stolen mule. This embarrassed Cherokee, and as soon as he became drunk enough, he set out to make himself a new reputation. He forced several men to get down and pray in Jack Dall's saloon, then wandered into the general store. Here he ordered Pat O'Day to dance a hornpipe, meantime splattering the floor about Pat's feet with bullets. The Irishman picked up a convenient sledge hammer and knocked the outlaw unconscious.

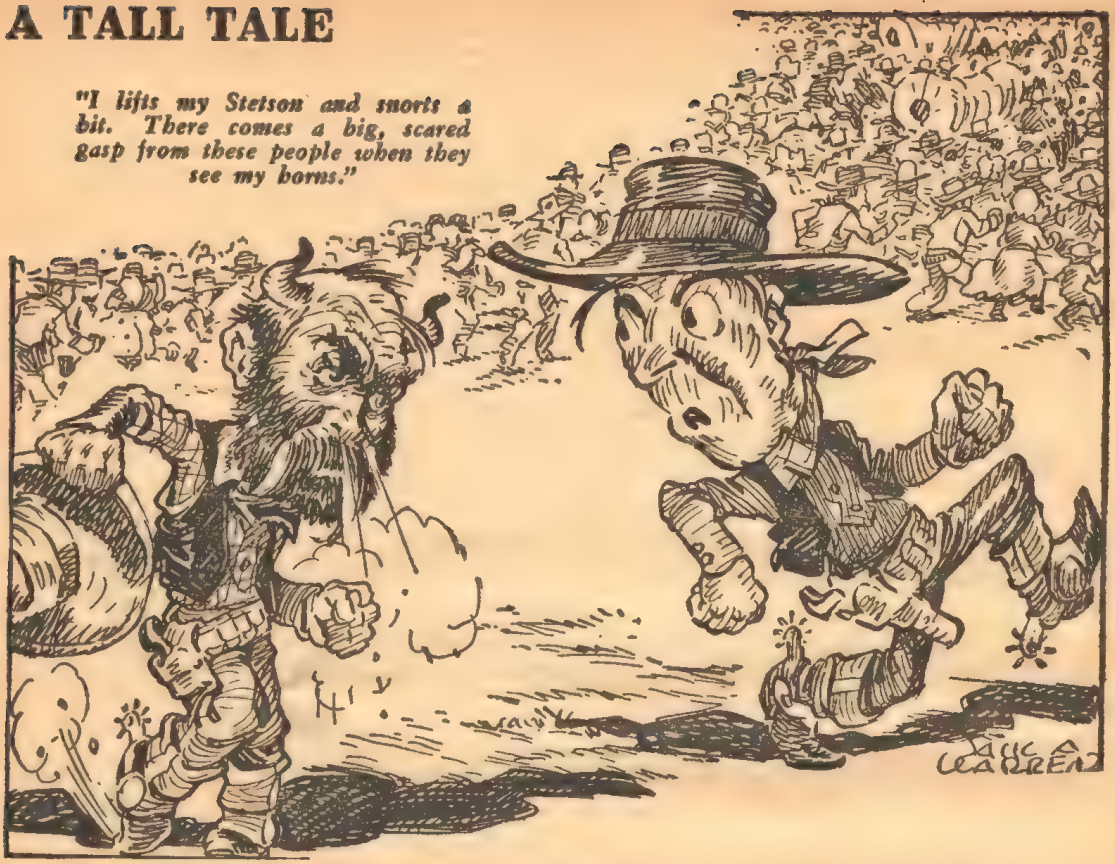
Pat then dragged the insensible Cherokee into the main street where a group of citizens assembled. All agreed that Cherokee Jack should be taught a lesson.

"Thar ain't no use in all of us citizens getting messed up in this affair," said one. "We'll wander down to the smelter and inspect the machinery. You'll find my Long-Tom rifle behind the saloon bar."

So the worthy citizens retired to the smelter and devoted themselves to examining the machinery. When they heard the rifle's report they came back, held a funeral, and refreshed themselves at the bar of Nick Babcock's saloon.

A TALL TALE

"I lifts my Stetson and snorts a bit. There comes a big, scared gasp from these people when they see my horns."



LONGHORN LUKE

By

J. W. TRIPLETT

With Cattle So Thick They Cast One Shadow Over The Whole State Of Texas The People Packed And Left, Leaving A Big Problem Requiring A Big Answer By Longhorn Luke.

Longhorns cow brutes! Talk about critters gettin' plumb out of hand! They shore done it the year the walls of the Grand Canyon of the Rio Grande was chiseled straight down by the jagged hailstones fallin' the size of cart-wheels.

Havin' foreseen suthin' of what was goin' to happen, I'm comin' out of the Big Bend Country headed fer the settled parts of Texas with my Eleven Appaluchian Longhorns, the critters that changed the history of the cow country. It's along between the Concho and the Brazos at the bed of a dry creek that we meets the trail driver, Hardpan Harrigan.

He r'ars back in his saddle and jerks his bronc to a standstill. His long, dun mustaches rises from a limber drag to a stiff p'int.

"Cow-critters!" he squawks. "Purple spotted steers all gone to horn. And the horns long enough to rake furrers in both banks of the Rio Grande river at the same time."

It was the truth. My steers wasn't

much more'n twice the size of reg'lar longhorns, but their head antlers was as long as a turned and polished pine tree.

"Where did yuh git sich critters?" he wants to know.

"These here is Longhorn Luke Larabee's Eleven Appaluchians, trained fer doin' big jobs," I interduces. "Look at the big bend of them polished head sabres. That's where they come from, the Big Bend of the Rio Grande. They're specially developed stock. Reg'lar longhorns with six and seven foot horns ain't near so smart."

He eyeballs my trained critters, from Solomon, who's the leader, to Purple Peter, the cut-up that brings up the rear.

"There's longhorns from here to the Sabine and from the Red River to the Gulf," he gulps. "I figgered I'd seen the branded stock of ever' ranch in the country, but I ain't never before seen a cow-brute with horns long enough to make a ridgepole fer a lodge room."

"They all runs to horn in the Texas Big Bend," I tells him.

He looks at me right then like I'm a passel of panthers creepin' up on him. "Yuh don't mean there's many more of these exter-horned critters in the Big Bend Country?" he gurgles.

"Shore. West of the Pecos they're thicker than cactus, and mostly wilder than antelope goats, what with the country bein' unsettled like it is."

"Then we'll fight our way clear to Californy," he snarls. "And right here is the place to begin."

His hand flashes down to his hip and comes up with a hogleg that wasn't nothin' but a cannon from the Battle of Bull Run. The weapon levels on Solomon.

His draw sort of takes me unawares, but I shore come to life quick. Before he can thumb the hammer, I flips my quirt across his bronc's flanks. The hoss comes unscrewed proper. He takes half a jump forward and two jumps up in the air, sunfishin' on the up and sunfishin' on the down. Hardpan's cannon explodes and his chin pops on his wishbone.

He's took as much by surprise as I was by him drawin'. Maybe he could have stayed with the bronc otherwise, but when the gun barks, the hoss does a houlihan right in the middle of the sky. Hardpan spreads out like a bat, and the next thing he knows he's wrapped around Solomon's right horn. His left boot heel is on the back of his neck and his spur gougin' his right ear. The six-gun is on the ground curlin' smoke and Hardpan is makin' gaggin' noises tryin' to git his wind. Solomon stands there floppin' his ears.

After lookin' the Eleven Appaluchians over to see that the shot done no harm, I breaks the gun and rides up under Hardpan to help him unwrap.

"Jist what is the idee?" I asks when he straightens some.

"I'm a-leadin' the people of Texas in a ex-e-o-dus away from cow-critters," he gasps, "and we swore to kill ever' bovine animal that got in our way. We figgered to live in the Big Bend, but now—"

"By all the big bellerin' bulls of the Brazos, what kind of Texicans is it that starts a ex-e-o-dus away from cattle? The likes of them ain't fit to live even in the quicksand bottoms of the Red River."

"It's all of Texas," he blurts out. "The state is plumb ruint by cow-critters since Lee had to surrender to Grant three year ago. The animals has been multiplyin' all endurin' the war, and they jist keeps producin' and reproducin' till there's six fer ever' tree and ten fer ever' bush."

"This hoss foreseen the way things was goin'," I nods. "That's why I trained the Eleven Appaluchian Longhorns. But I shore never thought Texicans would run away from cattle."

"Yuh'll have to run, too," he snaps. "Cow-brutes has done got the upper hand. They tore up all the corrals. They busted down all the rail fences. They even stampedes through barns and houses."

"So bad as that?"

"Worse. And they gits wilder and bolder ever' day. Tired of bein' overrun, Texicans decides to git away, and I promises to lead 'em to a country without cow-brutes, the Big Bend. Now it turns out to be full of superlonghorns."

"Where's this ex-e-o-dus?"

"Right there, comin' around the p'int. I was jist scoutin' ahead fer water which we needs bad. Thought this creek might furnish it, but she's dry as a powder keg."

He looks on his backtrail. A-comin' around the p'int I see a covered wagon, and after it another and another till there's so many in view that they can't be counted. And still they keeps comin' on and on. There's hundreds of hossback riders, too.

"Better git them star scrapers over the hill," Hardpan warns, after catchin' his bronc. "Them rannies are on the run and on the prod. All longhorns in the way gits killed."

"Water. Did you say the emigrants need water?"

"Shore we need water. But the first thing will be to butcher them spread antlered Appaluchians."

"Yuh need water, and yuh need to go back home. We'll turn back this ex-e-o-dus, Hardpan. Texas shall not be left to the longhorns fer a playground."

"Let 'em look my Appaluchians over. This hoss will have suthin' to interest 'em."

He jist snorts.

I goes back to my pack mules and gits busy with takin' twenty-two scoop-shovels and a pair of goat horns strapped together out of them packs. And by the time the riders along with the first wagons comes lopin' up, I've got my trained Appaluchians at work in the bed of the creek.

"Longhorns! And what horns!" they roars.

"Trained fer big work," I says, facin' the crowd with my Stetson ridin' a little high on my head.

"Trained or not trained, the cow-critters in our path dies," some of the leaders of the crowd growls.

"Wild and wooly and full of fleas,
Never been curried below the knees."

I bellers that right back.

They looks at me sort of ory-eyed, forgettin' about killin' cow critters fer a minute. I punches Hardpan and tells him to interduce me to the crowd, and he boggles out:

"This here is Longhorn Luke Larabee with his Eleven Appaluchian Longhorns from the Big Bend."

I waves my hand to them, figgerin' ways to give the Appaluchians time to work. About that time a feller comes out with a question that I'd been hopin' to hear.

"How come them steers to have sich long horns?"

"It's the Big Bend water," I tells him, "nothin' but the water of the country yuh all are headin' fer. It makes horn grow fast and big on ever' critter that drinks it. Jackrabbits out there has horns three inches to three feet long, dependin' on their age. The horns of the horned frogs are so long they scratches the ground behind 'em. All the doe deer has at least ten points, and the bucks shed their antlers four times ever' year."

"Ain't yuh spreadin' it on a little thick?" one of them fellers says.

"Thar's proof," I growls, pointin' to the Appaluchians. "There ain't a man in Texas got a rawhide lariat longer than the measure of them horns from tip to tip."

There's quite a lot of argifyin' and talkin' among the big crowd by this

time. But most of 'em nods their heads. They shore got to believe their eyes.

"That shore is hard to swaller, Mr. Longhorn Luke," the Doubtin' Thomas chirps.

"By all the big bellerin' bulls of the Brazos, I had ort to gore yuh through and through," I roars at him.

"No offense meant," he says.

"Then don't be so perlite. I don't tolerate no misterin'."

"Shore then, Longhorn," he agrees. "But tell us some more about the Horned Country of the Big Bend. We've sot out to make our homes there."

"Then yuh'll soon be growin' horns, too," I booms out so that all can hear. "And yore children'll have 'em."

The Doubtin' Thomas sort of chokes and sputters while the others stand in their tracks, deadstill with their mouths open. He has sich a chokin' spell that Hardpan asks him what's wrong.

"I'm about to git perlite agin," he gurgles, "instead of jist callin' this Longhorn Luke an out and out double riveted liar."

"There's proof of human horns in the Big Bend Country," I orates, glancin' at the Eleven Appaluchians and findin' they're workin' away at the job I had set 'em.

"What proof?"

I lifts my high crowned Stetson and shakes the long hair on my head. There comes a sort of gasp from the crowd suthin' like the soughin' of wind in pines, when they sees the two horns that's stickin' up out of my hair.

"Jist like a goat's horns, and growin' right out of his head," Hardpan busts out.

"These here is jist buttons to what some of the old-timers in the Big Bend wears around," I goes on, loud and clear. Then I whispers to Hardpan, "I'll have 'em glad to turn back home on that one."

"They can't," he gulps. "There's too many Texas cow-brutes on the prod. The critters is follerin' right on our trail. It's the devil if we go back, and the same if we go on, not meanin' any slurs on them head ornaments of yore's, howsomever."

"This is shore bigger work than I figgered," I admits.

Texicans is lookin' at me and lookin' ory-eyed at each other, and I know that they're thinkin' they shore left a good country to come to a horny one.

They go to driftin' into groups, argyen' whether to go on or not. There's some hot word slinging and fist fights break out in a dozen places. It ain't long till the nearest ones gathers up like they has made up their minds all at once and they comes rushin to'ards me.

"We're goin' on," they shouts. "Cattle in our path gits killed."

I tries to soothe 'em. "These Eleven Appaluchian Longhorns are trained fer big—"

"Trained or not trained, they gits killed. We've suffered enough from longhorns."

Ones in front drags their hoglegs and goes trompin' straight to'ards the Appaluchians, which in their faithful innocent way are still workin' with the shovels in the creek bed. There ain't no doubt but what the crowd means biznis. I rises and stands on my saddle.

"Hold on a minute," I yells. "Do you know what them critters are doin'?"

"Shore. We can see. They're diggin' and diggin'. They got big shovels strapped onto them overlong horns and they're throwin' sand out of the creek."

"They're diggin' fer yuh all, fer ever' human in this ex-e-o-dus," I tells 'em.

"A purty trick, but they're jist diggin' their own graves. We don't tolerate no crow-critters in our path and we got to escape them behind us."

"Ain't yuh thirsty fer water? Don't yuh need water quick?"

That holds 'em a second, and I sees tongues lickin' dry lips.

"Them Appaluchians are tryin' to help yuh all," I goes on, takin' quick advantage. "Look at Purple Peter down there. See the slushy wet sand he's heavin' out on the bank. My critters are uncoverin' the buried stream."

They stares at the shovelin' longhorns. First the left and then the right horn plunges into the holes they have made. The shovels strapped on the ends comes up and the sand flips out on the bank. Solomon sets the pace and the others watch him, makin' the same moves he makes at the same time like soldiers with their muskets. All the sand is comin' up slushy from every shovel.

"Water will be risin' fer yore thirsty throats in another minute," I booms.

It's shore the truth. The very next shovelfuls of sand comes up runnin' with water. We can hear the gurglin' of it as it busts through and comes swirlin' to fill the holes and overflow into the bed of the creek that had been so dry. I tells my longhorns to back off.

"There's yore water, and plenty of it," this hoss bellers. "Let her settle and yuh can drink yore fill at the Eleven Appaluchian Spring."

"Whoo-ee-ee! Ki-yi-yippee! Eeyow-how!" yells that crowd, and I know the water is winnin' them over.

But right at that minute I sees a man ridin' hell-fer-leather through the wagons and the crowd. His hoss is covered with lather and he keeps quirtin' his flanks though the animal is blowin' and about ready to drop. All eyes turns his way.

"Run fer yore lives!" I hear the rider yellin'. "Run fer yore lives! Longhorns has stampeded around the bend and headed this way!"

The crowd stands stunned fer a second, then they starts a stampede of their own fer their wagons and hosses. They was goin' to run from the wild runnin' longhorns, and it was no way to handle the job.

"Run! Run!" bellers the rider. "They ain't no piece away."

"That's great!" I roars out. "That's great! Texicans are goin' to win another battle! Let's git to work, conquer the longhorns and go back home."

"Home" is always a sort of magic work. Most ever' man will put up a scrap fer his home. The crowd hesitates.

"Come on! Foller me!" I booms out. "Longhorns can be controlled."

"Lead away!" they roars. "We'll try it."

"Takes head work," I tells 'em. "Bring me twenty-two bolts of calico out of yore wagons."

While I'm gittin' my Eleven Appaluchians up out of the creek bed and unstrappin' the shovels, the men rustles out bolts of calico, though I can see they're thinkin' I'm somewhat looney.

"I'm shore thankful that women folks always takes calico by the bolt when they goes on the far frontier," I tells him.

They brings me plenty of the yard goods. So I'm able to pick out twenty-two bright colored bolts, which I gets some of the men to help me carry along as we all lopes out to meet the longhorn stampede. Yuh can tell 'em I didn't fergit to take along them Eleven Appaluchians.

ARROW
MONTANA

There's hoof thunder and the clatter of horns and the bawlin' of the herd comin' to us from around the bend. The critters ain't givin' us much time fer preparations, but I'm shore glad to git what little there is. The leaders shows up in a minute more, runnin' plumb wild and ory-eyed. They're followed by a flood—a reg'lar avalanche of critters.

Dust fogs and roils from their hoofs. Horns flash in the sunlight. And their backs roll like waves in

the Gulf. There ain't no end to the cow-critters in sight. Fact, it looks like the ocean has turned to longhorns and is rollin' and thunderin' in on us.

The earth shivers like a wind swept aspen.

"We'll never stop 'em," I hears some of the men groan.

"Hit the p'int, men," I booms out. "Turn 'em jist a little. I'll do the rest."

They rides hell-fer-leather to meet the wild-runnin' herd. My helpers drops their bolts and storms along with the rest. They gits alongside of one cow-brute after another and goes to workin' 'em over to the right. But I reckon there ain't a man of 'em that believes the stampede can be turned by their work. There was jist too many cattle runnin' to ever hope fer cowpokes to git any control until the critters would be plumb winded and run down.

Still they storms into the work jist like it was downin' a yearlin' at a county rodeo, ridin' their desperate ride fer all and more than it's worth.

But that great mass of critters thunders on. Fer ever' longhorn givin' way there's a hundred to take his place. The critters rolls up to nigh where I'm workin' with my Eleven Appaluchians, and it ain't but seconds till they will be chargin' into the wagons where the women and children are gathered. Riders commences to pull six-guns and longhorns stagger and fall as they cracks down.

Still the stampede don't move over enough to count. Men see that the wagons and all that's in 'em are due to go under the hoofs of the mad herd. Some breaks away to ride to their wagons, tangled in the idee that they might some way win to safety with mother, sister or sweetheart.

That's the way the battle is breakin' when I looks up from my last little job on the Appaluchians. I jumps into my saddle and waves to my trained critters to foller me. We hits out like we're j'inin' the stampede, but we're headin' sort of at an angle across the front.

My bronc lays his ears back when I rams spurs in his hide. Runnin' like antelope, the Eleven Appaluchian Longhorns string out behind me with their horns high in the air. We skims right ahead of the stampede and lines out between the crazy critters and the wagons.

Right then and there the bawlin', earthquakin' stampede is stopped. The wild cow-brutes plants their feet in a slide and their wind in a long "whoo-oosh." They're seein' things they ain't never before seen.

Floppin' and poppin', billowin' and swirlin' in the wind are twenty-two streamers of long calico that I've tied to them Appaluchians' enormous horns.

That kind of boogers will skeer anything with horns and hoofs. Even them critters so far in the rear that they can't see, catches a idee that a change has come. They all plants their feet and stops, tangled and tied up in fear of suthin' the like of which they never expected to run into.

While the herd is sort of weak-kneed and undecided, I gives the Appaluchians a sign and they heads straight fer the herd. Them wild longhorns can't take it. They jist wheels and takes out, tails up and lungs a-bellerin'.

There's twelve-year-old steers in that big herd so skeered they're bawlin' fer their mammas.

The stampede breaks out to the north, which is the way I wants 'em to run. I eases the Appaluchians down to a walk and then has 'em to stop while I goes back to the ex-e-o-dus.

"Yuh all can turn around and go back home now," I tells 'em. "With the removal of these excess wild cattle from the settled country, there'll be enough men to handle what's left."

"That was shore great work," the Doubtin' Thomas busts out. "More

than a million cow-critters stopped in their mad stampede and turned plumb away into another direction. But runnin' 'em once don't mean anything permanent. They ain't so far away but what we can hear the thunder of their hoofs right now. In a day or so they'll be right back."

"This hoss will take care of 'em," I growls.

They all gathers around tryin' to shake my hand and demandin' to know how I could keep the critters away from their homes. Seein' they was skeered and had to be convinced, I picks up a piece of charcoal and draws a map of Texas on the closest wagon sheet.

"Up in here," I says, pointin' to the Panhandle, "up in here is the high plains—a great, windswept, treeless *mesa*. There ain't nothin' on it but buffalo and antelope. I'm goin' to take them wild cattle up there and leave 'em."

"They'll shore come back."

"No. Ever' time a one of them critters takes a notion to come down over the caprock of the *mesa*, he's goin' to change his mind and run the other way. They never will be able to git over their fear of calico streamers on long horns."

"Reckon, yuh can drive 'em up there with yore trained Appaluchian Longhorns, but them few critters can't line ride four hundred mile of caprock after the herd scatters," p'ints out my doubter.

"Shore not. But that's where I'll need a little help from some of yuh cowpokes that can be spared to go along with me. We'll drive stakes."

"Drive stakes," he snorts. "Drive stakes. Ain't that a grand idee. Whoo-ooee!"

"By all the big bellerin' bulls of the Brazos," I roars, pushin' my hair back between them horns and starin' him in the eye, "by all the mad, stompin' bulls of the whole Texas country, I had ort to run my horns through yore wind pipe."

He sobers and ogles at me, at the same time backin' away a little.

"A good gorin' is what this hoss usually gives the fellers that cast doubts on what I say," I goes on, rakin' them horns around.

The great crowd is lookin' at me, and I can see that I've got their confidence. Doubtin' Thomas don't say no more.

"Yuh all have seen what wavin' calico will do fer them wild cow-brutes," I orates on. "They'll turn tail and run ever' time they gits near it."

"Shore," they comes back. "They shore will."

"We'll drive stakes at ever' place where the critters can come over the caprock. And on them stakes we'll hang the skulls of dead longhorns."

I stops and looks over all the assembly to see if ever' Texican is lookin'. There ain't an eye but what's turned my way, except fer a pair of cross eyed twins from Atascosa.

"Go on. Tell us," some of 'em sort of sighs.

"On them horns of the longhorn skulls will be tied bolts of calico, which same will always be flutterin' and billowin' in the wind that never ceases to whip across the Panhandle."

A loud whoop goes up from the crowd, and another, and another, till the roar drowns out the thunder of the departin' hoofs of the wild herd. Purty soon I sees men goin' to their wagons and turnin' their teams to'ards their homes. As they passes by me they waves and whoops, and I nods my head and horns to one and all.

My doubter even sees that my way of handlin' the job is jist what is needed. With some others that can be spared he comes to help me with the stakes and skulls and calico.

The plan shore worked. Them stakes has gone down in history. Take a good map of Texas today, and the Panhandle country will be marked on it, "Staked Plains."

The Cactus City Department

VOL. 10 No. 30

BUSINESS R'ARES AT TWO SALOONS

Jackass Jake and Short-Quart Darn Near Start Revolt

You got to hand it to a couple of local business men for being nothing less than a pair of financial wizards. They have made business boom where none has boomed before, and things would have been booming yet if'n a dude stranger hadn't, without knowing it, busted up the strategy.

It all started about three weeks ago when Jackass Jake walked into the Studhorse Bar and bought drinks for the crowd. Now, that was a unheard-of thing to do, for Jackass owns the Cantina, which is the chief competitor of the Studhorse Bar in the liquor business. When Jackass enters and hollers for everybody to belly up and drink, why everybody is practically astounded and uneasy, figuring that there is going to be some hell a-popping.

However, Short - quart Cunningham, who runs the Studhorse, tries to act unconcerned. He even shakes hands with Jackass to show their ain't no hard feelings, even if they are rivals in the liquor business. To the crowd that don't look right atall, atall, and they hold their breaths for the fireworks. But nothing happens. When everybody has had their drink, Jackass slaps down a twenty - dollar gold - piece, waits for his change, then walks out of the Studhorse back to his own place.

Everybody in town practically makes a guess as to what in hell is the idea of Jackass patronizing his competitor. But there don't seem to be any answer. Then things get

(and Col. Next Page)

DESERT TRAGEDY

One of Sheepherder's Family Eaten by Coyotes

Single-foot Fulton brings in news of a most mournful tragedy which happened out on the desert last week. Coming up from Poison Springs, Single-foot took the short-cut through the sheep country, despite the smell. (He was in a hurry.) As he was passing a flock of the woolly stinkers he noticed a herder setting under a mesquite bush and crying and bawling like he had been peeling onions.

Now, Single-foot is a warm-hearted gent, besides being curious, so he stopped and inquired what in hell was the idea of the sheepherder bawling like he was. Between sobs the sheepherder explained that the night before a coyote had killed and ate one of the sheep.

Well, that explanation left Single-foot with his mouth hanging open. Coyotes kill hundreds of sheep, and that ain't nothing unusual, so why should anyone, even a sheepherder blubber about the loss of one single woolly? Plum disgusted, Single-foot said as much, but the herder kept right on crying. Directly, though, he caught his breath and explained: "You no onderstan'! You no onderstan'! Thees sheep—eet was no ordeenary sheep—eet was Mabel."

Cooperation

When somebody started complaining about the heat the other day, Gold-pan Parker sniffs kind of sarcastic and declares that we are having regular Eskimo weather.

"When I was prospecting down below the Border in Sonora," he declares, "it got so hot that when a dog chased a rabbit, they'd both walk to keep from gettin' prostrated."

HIGH-GRADE HAS BIG LAUGH ON HARD-ROCKERS

Cave-in Smells Fishy Although It's Ten Miles to Water

The bunch of miners who is working claims on Mesa Ora almost saved one of their bunch from certain death last Wednesday. This bunch has a system of sending one man to town for grub every other Wednesday. At straight-up noon on that day they all meet at High-grade Hogan's diggings, get their supplies from the hombre who went to town, then get back to their own claims.

Last Wednesday the bunch congregated per schedule, but there was no sign of High-grade. In searching around for him they discovered that the shaft he has been working on had caved in. They found tracks going in but none coming out, so they knew he was trapped inside. Immediately they all grabbed shovels and dug like hell to clear out the shaft. It was after sundown when they finally broke through the slide—and just as they did, why High-grade himself came walking up the hill.

There was a good deal of surprise by all hands, and then High-grade explained that he had forgot it was Wednesday and he had been prospecting on the far side of the Mesa all day. However, he was much obliged for the bunch cleaning out the cave-in, which he had intended to tackle the first thing in the morning.

(And do you know that that single-minded bunch of hard-rockers believed him! Honest they did! They never stopped to figure that even if a man forgot it was Wednesday, why that was no reason for his walking out of his shaft backwards, like High-grade must have did.)

EDITORIAL

It appears like it is again up to the editor of the *Gazette* to take pen in hand and give the citizens of Cactus City a talking to. This time it is about the Help-Keep-Our-City-Clean Movement.

Offhand, I ain't dead sure just what that has to do with. You see, it was the Women's Reform Committee of Cactus City (all of who subscribe to this paper) who suggested that I take a hand in the movement, but they didn't give me any details. Howsoever, it sounds like a worthy cause, so here goes:

Listen here, you sway-backed, bowlegged bull-chasers! What in hell is the idea of not keeping our city clean? Don't you know that in town you are supposed to act different than on the range? After this when you waddies come into civilization (Cactus City) for a bust, don't throw your whiskey bottles in the street. It is littered up enough already (and I ain't mentioning any names).

And after you get through eating a can of peaches or some other canned delicacy, why throw the can under a building or somewheres out of sight. Honest, anybody'd think that you gents don't know how to act polite. Like Latigo Gill when he shot that dog which took a bite out of his leg a couple of weeks ago. Instead of throwing it into somebody's back yard or caching it under a mesquite, he just left it laying there in the middle of the street.

Now, a trick like that shows a total lack of Civic Pride. Latigo, didn't you realize that the temperature was 120 in the shade, if there was any shade? And didn't you realize that the combination of heat and dead dog make a mighty unpleasant atmosphere. (It would have been unpleasanter yet if the next day a couple of buzzards hadn't gotten venturesome and flew down right here in town for a square meal.)

But to get back to the lecture. It's up to you folks who live in town to set a good example. You can't ex-

(See Last Col.)

(Continued From Page 1)

more complicated the next day, when Short-quart does the same thing that Jackass did the day previous. He goes down to the Cantina, buys everybody a drink—also with a twenty-dollar gold-piece—then goes back to his own place of business.

The next day Jackass again buys the drinks up at his rival's bar. The day after, Short-quart again follows suit. For about two weeks this business is kept up, with nobody being able to figure it out. But now, since it has stopped, the *Gazette* is able to give its readers the reason (but not an explanation) of this sudden business boom.

It seems that a few weeks ago somebody sluffed off a counterfeit twenty on Jackass, and he hit on the bright idea of making a damn fool out of his competitor by passing it off at the Cantina. He did, all right, but he didn't figure that Short-quart would come right back at him with the same phony piece of money. That same bum twenty kept passing back and forth for two weeks, until Jackass accidentally gave it to some dude who took it out of town with him, therefore ending the big boom in the liquor business.

Well, now, off-hand the tricks the boys play on each other ain't very important, but in this case the trick is worth a million dollars to anybody smart enough to figure it out.

In the first place, that twenty wasn't any good, but just the same it brought a lot of extra business to both Short-quart and Jackass. In the end, neither one of them lost anything—because they was paid for every drink they shoved across the bar. Not even the dude who packed the twenty away was out anything, because he'll sluff it off on somebody else (in Mesa Springs, I hope.)

If that kind of high financing ain't a good lesson to some of you smart hombres, then it ought to be. Just think it over—and if you can give the right answer, I'll set 'em up. When nobody loses in a business deal of that kind, then there's something wrong somewheres — maybe with my arithmetic.

LADIES, COUNT YOUR BRITCHES

Owner May Have Same By Proving Ownership

If I was just sure it was his idea of a joke, and not a accident, yours truly would put a loop around one Hi Hip and drag him through the cactus until you couldn't tell whether he was a Chink or a Choctaw. The last time he brought me back my laundry, I got something which in no wise belongs in a bachelor establishment. Never in my life have I wore white knee pants with lace around the bottom. (The bottom of the legs, you smart hombres!)

I didn't recognize them, so I can't return them to the lady who owns them.

CAN'T FOOL POP

Although he is too old and rickety on his legs to do any dancing, Pop McCoy never fails to attend a social shindig. He gets lots of fun just setting around watching other folks dance, especially when so many of the gals are wearing these here "bob-wire dresses."

(A bob-wire dress is like a bob-wire fence: It protects the property without obstructing the view.)

EDITORIAL

(Continued)

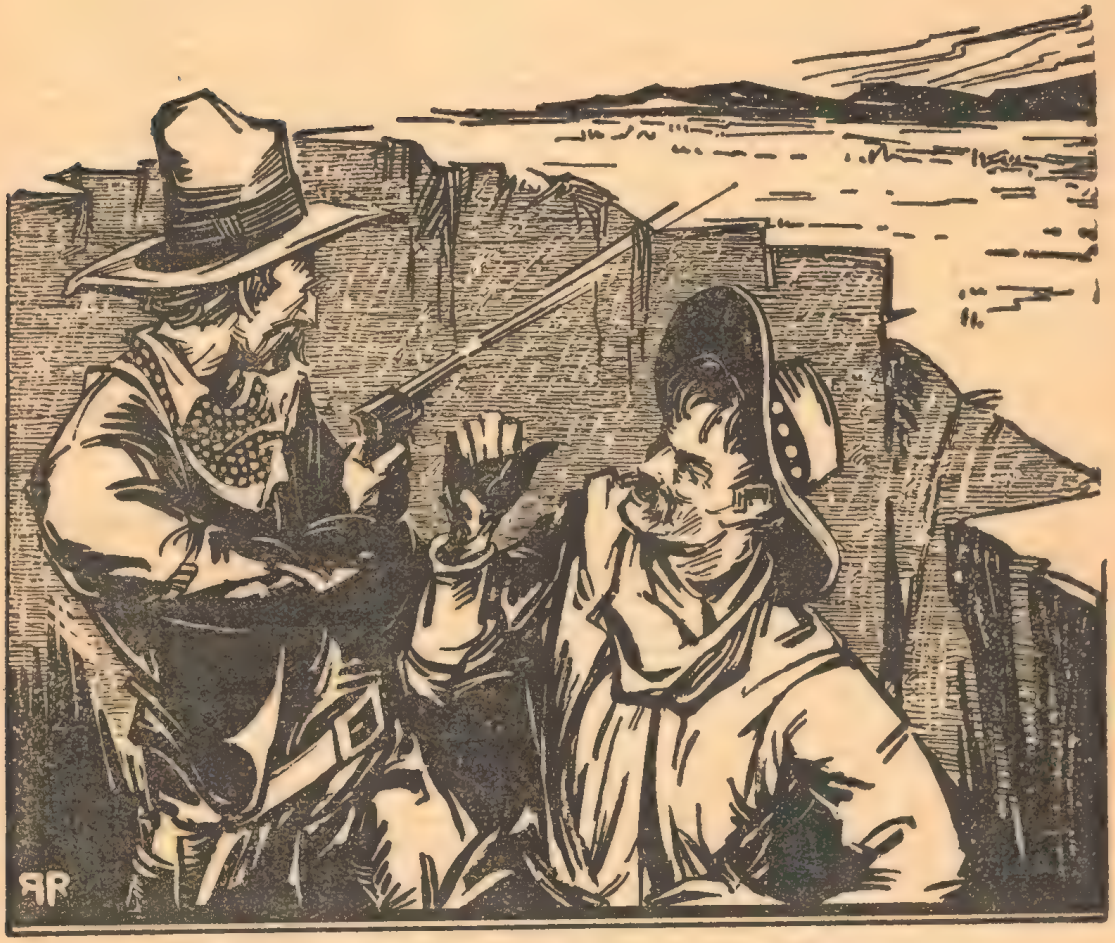
pect the boys from the ranches to keep things neat if you don't. I guess the best rule for you town folks to follow is never to throw anything over the backyard fence that the wind won't blow away.

That's about all I can think of right now. There is one more thing, probably the biggest cause of littered-up town, but I can't think of any remedy for it. It might help, though, to move all the hitch-rails to the *back* of the stores and saloons instead of having the horses tied right on the main street. It is up to some smart hombre to figure this thing out, because after all, you can't expect the *horses* to understand this Help - Keep - Our - City - Clean Movement.

OWL HEAD RUCKUS

By

J. E. GRINSTEAD



"What's the matter with you?" growled Short. "You killed that gent deader'n a mackerel."

High And Short Never Knew How Skeered They Could Be Until They Chased A Herd Of Two-Legged Critters Into Godless Plains—Where The Sands Were So Hot Gila Monsters Wore Shoes And Carried Water.

Ganderville was a railroad center. That is, the railroad ran through the center of it, and the trains stopped—sometimes. The town was about thirty miles square, but it was not finished. In fact, there were only about a dozen houses built, so far. The rest of the town site was a lovely place to play marbles, only the hot winds kept them rolling all the time. There were no streets. The dozen houses were in a row, running from north to south, and each had two fronts—east and west. The stores, saloons, barbershop and what have

you, fronted west. The residences were in the other end of the buildings. In the mornings the womenfolk scattered along in front of the business end of the buildings, patching pants and shirts, dresses, and other things, while the sun scorched the east end of the buildings. In the afternoons, the women tried to cook a little, while the men scattered along the shady east front, smoked, chewed, spat at horned toads, and cursed the weather. On a certain morning two specks showed on the horizon, far to the east of Ganderville. They bobbed up and down in the heat-waves, disappeared, reappeared, and finally developed into two horsemen, wending wearily across the sandy waste toward the inviting city.

Those two specks, that uncannily turned to horsemen, were High and Short. They had been traveling westward for four days. They had made three dry camps, and found one water-hole, which had a lovely ruffle of little dead yellow butterflies around the edge, and about a barrel of rapidly disappearing water in the middle. They knew they could never go back that way and live—unless it rained, and the outlook for rain was not promising. The only water within twenty miles of Ganderville came from a well, just west of the row of houses, and was drawn by a lazy windmill. The wind blew so hard that it took a day or two for it to change, and at such times the windmill would not run, and water famines were not uncommon. The two pilgrims rode on to town. They saw the windmill beyond the houses from them, and circled to water. The wind was not changing at the time, and the watering trough was full, and a fine stream was pouring out the pipe.

COMPLETE HIGH AND SHORT NOVEL

They dismounted. Their horses stuck their noses into the water up to their eyes. High took the tin cup off the nail in the wooden frame of the windmill, dropped it, cursed, then picked it up and held the handle in the stream from the pipe. He filled the cup, drank, and smacked his mouth.

"Gosh, that water's cold." Then he passed a cupful to Short. Old Short took a swallow, rolled his big gray eyes at High, and growled:

"If it was agin the law to lie, you'd be sent to pen for life. A spoonful of coffee would help this stuff."

They left their horses and walked toward a sign that indicated that food might be served there.

"Short," said High, "I got just two dollars left, and I aim to shoot the works on grub. If we get that job, we'll make some more money. If we don't get it, we'll starve to death anyway."

"Hiram, son," mourned Short, "you ain't the partner you used to be. If you was, you would of let me have them two dollars back yonder in town, and I might have won enough on 'em that we wouldn't had to come this far west to get work."

"I never knowed I had it," grinned High, "until we had been on the trail two days, and I got sober. Then I finds it in the watch-pocket of my pants. I could get a couple of quarts of licker with it, but just to show you I am a good partner, I'll put it into grub, and you'll get half of it, if you eat fast."

They entered the restaurant. A slatternly girl strolled behind the counter, chewing gum.

"Got any canned peaches?" asked High.

"Nope."

"Ham and aigs?"

"Got some 'am," replied the girl, changing her gum to the other side. "Ain't no hens in this country. Feller brought some here one time, but all the aigs they laid was hard-boiled, and couldn't be scrambled."

"Ham and coffee," ordered High. "Two dollars worth."

It was half an hour later that the partners sat in the two-foot of shade on the west side of the houses, rolling a smoke.

"Ganderville," said Short. "That name ain't logical. Gooses wants water a plenty, and if that old mill stopped turning fifteen minutes, everybody in this town would die. Hiram, son, there is beauty in logic. Nothing can be true without logic. Me, I am always strong for logic and truthfulness."

"I don't know whether a man can be truthful without logic or not, but if you are logical, I know a feller can be two-three times crazier than hell when he's got it. If you hadn't been crazy, you never would have piloted us to this place. If I weren't afraid I'd need all my ca'tridges before I get out of this mess, I'd shoot you to keep you from bitin' yo'self."

"Hiram, son," mourned Short, "the scriptures says, 'Blessed is them that suffers long, and revileth not.'"

"Shore," said High, "but them scriptures was wrote before some damn fool decides to build a town here, and call it Ganderville. They was wrote before a trusting, guileless youth like me is inveigled to follow a long-laigged kioty, with a knot on the end of his neck, for a head, into a mess like this, too. How the hell did you ever happen to do it? Nobody on earth could ever be that big a fool on purpose."

"Hiram, you ain't logical. You ain't just. You was drunk. We was broke and beggin'. I'm poor but honest, with some of the instincts of a gentleman left, in spite of associating with you. I ain't willing to work. Nobody but a damn fool is, if he can get along without it, but I looked at the hoosegow in that town, and didn't like it. I thinks there's fleas and other crawling things in that bastile, and you and me was apt to go there, if we

et again without paying for it. So, I—"

"Don't, Short," said High. "I'll apologize. Don't make me cry. I know I ought to appreciate you bringing me to this lovely hamlet, but damned if I can do it. You ain't told me how you happened to do it."

"Well, when I get broke, the first thing I think of is a job, like any other honest man. So, I asks a cowman if he could give us a job. He looks at me sorty funny, and says: 'No, I can't, but I just gets a letter from Slim Slater, out at Ganderville. Slim says he's going to need a coupla ranch hands, and he'll be in Ganderville four days from now. Will I send him out a couple? I ain't sent him none, and you two can just about make it.' I saddles the braunks, get you on yours, and we hits the trail west. You comes to the second day out. I reck'n you know the rest."

"I shore do," snapped High. "I wish I had stayed unconscious until yet. I—What the hell is that coming across the prairie yonder? Looks like it might be some of the forty-niners, just gettin' back from California."

"Hiram, son, them's trail-wagons. Just little ones. Six mules pulls three of them. I seen six mules pull as high as twenty-four waggins, when they was going with the wind, but they couldn't go back until the wind changed."

"That's a danged lie," grinned High, "but you can't help it. You are just that way. What the devil is them many wagons going to haul away from this place? All the houses, and a mile of railroad track wouldn't fill 'em, and—Goshamighty, look! There's Old Squatting Bull-He Cow, leading 'em." A man had ridden ahead of the wagons, and stopped at the watering trough. He dismounted, and High caught his breath. The man was six-foot four, distressingly slender, and very stoop-shouldered. He wore a beaded jacket, and about a yard of dirty shirt billowed out between that short jacket and the belt of his chaps.

"If that shirt tail ain't nine feet long," grinned High, "that gent is apt to disgrace hisself in about a minute."

"Shut up, fool," growled Short. "That's bound to be Slim Slater. No two men on earth would have any business in this place the same day."

"Aw hell, Short," chuckled High. "Don't talk that way about our new boss. That thing ain't a human, and look at that rig. Hand-carved bridle, rattlesnake b r o w b a n d, braunk's mane plaited, red conches on his chaps. He could never wear that rig on a ranch, and not get shot. The shadow is gettin' pretty narrow, but I want to watch him a minute, until he moves. I want to see whether he crawls like a snake, or flies like a kite."

The gentleman under discussion did neither. He walked with nine-foot strides until he got his lean body in that narrow strip of shade, and his feet turned sidewise so they would be out of the sun. Then he looked down at High and Short and said:

"Hi'yer, fellers. Are you the two hands that Old Man Giff Jones sent out here to me?"

"I shore don't know," said Short. "Old Man Giff sent us out here to a feller named Slim Slater, and from yo' looks, I reck'n you must be him." Old Short was looking that living skeleton with the loose hung underjaw and greedy gray eyes over, as he talked.

"Shore I'm Slim Slater, and I'm mighty glad you boys comes."

"Got right smart stock on that Owl Head ranch of yo'n?" asked High.

"Why, no," said Slim. "Only some horses there now. I sold off everything else, but I aim to restock. First lot is coming in today, and I'll need you to help me unload 'em, and get

'em to the ranch. The train ought to be in here pretty soon. We'll just mosey over to the station, and see if she is on time."

They started for the little red station. High and Short made a run for it, to keep from scorching their boots. Slim stopped and yelled at the men with the wagons:

"Soon as they all drink, fellers, and you get the water-barrels filled, swing them wagons over to the station and be ready. We got get moving to'ds the ranch as soon as we can."

Far out on the desert, High and Short could see a train coming. It looked like a bob-tailed snake skittering through the cactus. Once in a while it would whistle, but the jet of steam never got more than six inches high, before the heat ate it up. Slim Slater had gone into the station, to discuss something with the agent.

"Why, Short," said High, "that ain't no cattle train. It's a passenger."

"It shore is, Hiram. We have misguessed that gent, Slim Slater. He's one of these here big, fancy cowmen, and he's shipping in a load of fine bulls by express, and aims to take 'em out in them wagons."

"If that's what he aims to do," said High, "he's got more sense than he looks like he's got. A bull couldn't walk a mile in this hot sun without turnin' to tallow, and barbecued bull."

The train came snorting to a stop. The door of an express car was open, and a bundle of bedding and miscellaneous junk was thrown out before the train stopped. It struck the board platform and bounced as high as a man's head. Two Stetsons of the ten-gallon type, a pair of boots, a pair of hairy chaps, and some other articles of cowboy costume flew out of it as it lit.

"Gosh, that feller is rough as a chapped lip," grinned High. "I'll bet he don't throw them bulls out that way."

"He might," growled Short. "Some of these here railroaders are pretty good bull-slingers, but— Look at it snow!"

That snow was bundles of various sorts and sizes. By the time the train stopped good, the platform was covered with them, and they were still coming. The conductor was standing on the steps, holding his cap with one hand, to keep it from blowing off.

"Hi'yer, Con!" yelled Slim Slater. "Unload 'em. Any of 'em got laigs broke, or hips knocked down."

"I don't think so," grinned the conductor. "Here they come!"

Inside the coach hell had broke loose. It sounded as if a thousand people were singing, none of them in the same key. The heavy burden of the song was:

"Ki, yippy yi; ky, yippy yi." There seemed to be a thousand verses of it, each composed of the same three words.

"What the hell sort of language is that, Short?" asked High. "I've heard bulls sing plenty of times, but that's the first time I ever heard 'em sing that song."

"Hiram, son," said Short, his gray eyes goggling, "them ain't bulls. They're supposed to be humans, but damned if I believe it. Watch 'em crowd the gate. They'll be hips knocked down and hell to pay, if somebody don't hold 'em back."

High and Short crouched in the four-inch shade by the side of the station, watching the panic. They didn't find speech again until the train whistled, and pulled out, and that mob of assorted human animals swarmed onto the stack of bundles. They probably would be standing there yet, but Slim Slater came up to them just then, and said:

"Well, fellers, get busy, and point 'em for the waggins. If they ever scatter on us, we'll have one hell of a time rounding 'em up. Soon as their feet strike this hot sand, they'll go to running."

"Just a minute, podner," said High.

"What the hell sort of a ranch are you runnin', anyway?"

"What sort?" said Slim. "Why, it's a Dude Ranch. Didn't Old Man Giff Jones tell you?"

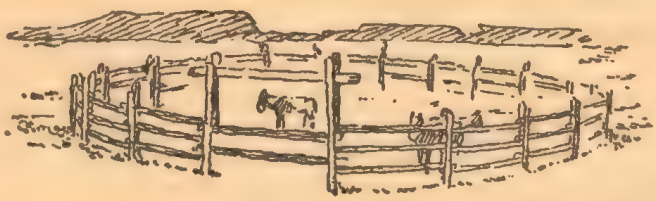
"No, he didn't, damn him, and I aim to kill him if I ever see him again."

"Well, don't stand talking," snapped Slim. "We got to get on the job. If one of them heifers ever gets her feet in that hot sand and her head down, she's gone, and I got to deliver 'em all back here when I get 'em tanned."

Slim dashed away toward his herd, expecting them to follow, but they didn't—at least not at once.

"Now, see here, Short," snapped High. "You have drug me into hell, and then turned crossways in the fire once too often. I'll be damned if I follow you into that mess. Here's where forbearance ceases to be virtuous, and I quit."

"Shut up, you damn fool," growled Short. "We can't quit, because we haven't commenced. We either work or starve. You know dang well we can't make it back to that big town we left, and if we do we go to that hoosegow I told you about."



"But, Short," whined High. "what the hell can we do? If I heel one of them spotted heifers, she'll fall on her nose and bust her bridgework. Look at 'em. They're all as crazy as a bunch of locoed braunks. They—" High broke off and laughed.

"What the hell's funny about it?" snapped Short.

"That fat girl with the peekaboo harness on stood still for about a minute, waiting to get her nose in the trough and grab one of them bundles. The sun got a focus on one of them little holes. All of a sudden she throws her shoulders back, and jerks her backbone into the shade. The next second the sun finds her shoulders, and she jerks them forward, and let her backbone come up for air. Damnedest thing I ever seen in my life. She got started to doin' that, and looked like she was having some sort of fit. Come on. I think I'm goin' to like this."

Slim was having no trouble getting them to follow him to the wagons. They grabbed up bundles of every imaginable size and shape. Some of them contained hundred-dollar fancy saddles, and hand-woven Indian bridles, that had been made by Navajo squaws—in the penitentiary at Sing Sing. Slim had caught him a gang of rich ones, and that hundred people were carrying ten thousand dollars worth of riding gear and equipment. The most useless thing they had brought along was a chaperone. She was a dignified dame, who wore nose-glasses. The sun got one crack at them, and burnt a freckle on each cheek as big as a chestnut burr.

There seemed to be about as many alleged men in the layout as there were women and girls. The men all had their collars open, like some fool had told them that cowboys wore their shirts. The result was that within five minutes they looked as if their heads and necks were angry at the world, and turning redder each moment.

"Some of 'em ain't got no side-partners," grinned High. "That big Old Sister that's follerin Slim don't seem to have none. Maybe Slim shipped her in to keep him company."

"That handsome lady is the chaperony."

"Chaperony, hell," grinned High. "That bunch of yearlin's may not know it, but they ain't goin' to be thinking of no devilment, when they have been in this sun about one hour. By tomorrow they won't want to do

anything but cry, cuss, and pray a little maybe, while somebody greases their backs, and fans 'em with a wet sack."

"Maybe so," said Short, "but if you disgrace me before these ladies, I aim to shoot you."

CHAPTER II

DUDE STAMPEDE

By that time, the main herd had gone around the end of the station, trying to keep in the shade of their bundles. Two girls were left behind, tugging at bundles that made them look like a pair of ants trying to make off with over-size grubworms.

"Let me pack that for you," said Short, swinging his battered old Stetson from his head.

"Oh, thank you," said a little sawed-off girl, who was about four foot six and would weigh a hundred and forty. "Do you belong to our spread?"

"Yes'm, I reck'n I do," said Short.

"How perfectly thrilling. We are all cowhands together. On the way out, all the other girls found side-partners, but we lacked two boys of having enough. We all call one another by first names, or nicknames. I'm Duck, and this other young lady is Skinny. We started to call her Slim, but we remembered that Mr. Slater's name is Slim, so we called her Skinny. Is that other gentleman in our spread?"

"Shore," said Short.

"How perfectly thrilling and lovely. What are your names."

"I'm Short, and he's High."

"Oh, Skin-nay," chortled Duck. "Isn't it the most thrilling thing imaginable. The other girls thought they were putting one over on us, and we have *real* cowhands for partners."

Short shouldered Duck's bundle, and she waddled away after him. High was trapped. That other girl was six foot if she were an inch, and could have crawled through a knothole.

"Well," said High, resignedly," you are a blame sight bigger than I am, but I reck'n I better carry that pack for you. I done admitted that I was a burro."

"Oh, no," laughed Skinny. "You don't look like any piece of furniture that I ever saw, and certainly not like a bureau."

That stumped High. He stumbled on around the little station, and staggered to the nearest of the wagons, wondering what the Sam Hill was in that bundle that made it so heavy. He heard something gurgle close to his ear, and licked his lips. Then he thought of sunburn lotion, cursed and went on to the wagon.

The bundles and bales had all been thrown into the wagons, and that mob of alleged humans had swarmed onto them without being told. They wanted to get their feet off that hot ground before their toenails warped off. Skinny and Duck seemed to be either hardier than the rest, or to have a little less sense. When their bundles were in the wagon, they stood talking to High and Short, but moving their feet nervously, like a hen on a hot griddle.

"The other couples are together," said Duck. "You two are going to ride with us, aren't you?"

"Why, no'm," said Short. "We got our braunks here, and aim to ride them."

"How thrilling," gurgled Duck. "I'll tell you what let's do. Let High and Skinny ride in the wagon, and I'll ride High's horse, with you. That would be so thrilling."

"All right," said Short. "That suits me. Come on High. Let's bring up our braunks, before this outfit begins to move."

High and Short started off toward their two rangy old sunfishers still standing at the watering trough, taking another drink from time to time, to replace the water that the sun stewed out of them.

"Now, see here, Short," said High. "You can't help bein' a damn fool, but they ain't no use in lettin' this heat make you clean crazy. You know

dang well that little sawed-off gal ain't forked enough to ride my old braunk. She—"

"Just a moment, Hiram," said Short gravely. "I think I told you that I still had some of the instincts of a gentleman left, in spite of my association with you. I won't stand for no more slighting remarks about a lady. Besides that, you damned little half-pint, I'll bet you my shirt agin you'n that your stirrups ain't long enough for her."

"I won't take the bet," grinned High. "If I lost my shirt, in this sun, I'd be committing suicide, and if I won you'n I'd be committing murder. This Duck woman is yo' gal. If she wants to go into a mix up with that old crow-hoppin', sunfishin' hellion, it's none of my business, but I'll tell you one more thing, and if that won't stop you, her blood will be on your head, as the feller says."

"What do you mean, you bow-laigged ape?"

"Why, just this. That braunk is used to natural smells, and don't pay no attention to 'em, but he ain't ever smelt a mixture of human sweat and vi'let talcum powder in his life. When he do he's apt to— Well, if I was a hoss, I know damn well—"

"Shut up, before I bend a gun over yo' head," growled Short. "Ladies don't sweat, they preespire. Besides that, this dry air evaporates all sweat as soon as it peeps out the pores of the skin. Of course, if you want to be short, and chinchy, and don't want to let the lady ride yo' braunk—"

"You go to hell," snapped High. "If I had ever been short and chinchy with you, you would of starved to death long ago. You long-laigged he gorilly. If you had a little less length and a little more brains you'd know better than to put that gal on a human hoss. I done give up. I'll ride in the waggin with Skinny. She ain't goin' to sweat. She's so thin that wind blowin' on her makes a noise like a horse-hair in a window, and a sunbeam can't hit her. Take the dang braunk. I wash my hands of the whole mess."

High turned and went back to the wagon. Short went on and brought up the two weather-beaten old broncs.

"Oh, how gorgeously thrilling," gurgled Duck, who wore boots and spurs of her own, and a ten-gallon hat that was lashed fore and aft, to keep the wind from taking it to the Atlantic seaboard. "Here's where I get the thrill of my life, and won't the other girls be jealous when they see me riding with a real cowhand, and like a real cowhand myself."

"Crazy as a couple of hells," muttered High, to himself. "You are going to heaven, and don't know it."

Slim Slater was busy at the head of his string of wagons, and had no idea what was going on back there, or he would have stopped it, for he didn't want any casualties in his cavalcade. High leaned against the end of the wagon, with Skinny by his side. She was lifting first one foot and then the other, as if she were standing in an ant bed, and the sun was cooking the grease out of her spur-straps. Short boosted Duck to the saddle, and gave her the reins.

"What a thrill, what a thrill," she warbled. "Oh, look. It's humping its back. How thrill—"

"Hold his head up, and let him crow-hop," yelled High. Short was mounting, and too far from Duck to do anything about it. Duck tried to pull the old bronc's head up, but she was too late. It was gone clean out of sight, between that sunfisher's fore-legs, and he was off. At the first jump, Duck seemed to melt into the saddle. At the second jump she went into the air like a corpulent bat. "Ketch her on the first bounce,

Short!" yelled High. "If you don't she'll keep on bouncing for a week."

Duck didn't bounce. She just flattened out on that hot ground, and gasped for breath. She had not landed on her bridge-work. In fact, to use a polite expression, the lady landed sitting, and two panes of glass fell out of a window in the little station. Short and Skinny ran to Duck, High caught his horse. With the assistance of Short and Skinny, and the pushing proclivities of that hot ground, Duck got to her feet, and waddled toward the wagon.

"It—It was thrilling," she said, rather soberly, "but I—I think I'll ride in the wagon."

Slim had seen a cloud go over the sun, and came back to see what caused it, for he had never seen a cloud in that country before. It was only Duck, flying toward heaven. The outfit was ready to roll. Duck and Skinny climbed into the back of the wagon. The wagons started with a jerk, and everybody sat down except Duck. She was standing up, holding to the sideboards.

"Why don't you sit down?" asked Skinny.

"It—It's more thrilling, standing up," replied Duck. "I can see the scenery better, and besides that—Well, it's more comfortable just now."

The wagons began to roll. Slim Slater had mounted his fancy horse, and now rode up to High and Short.

"I'll point 'em, fellers," he said. "You bring up the drag, and don't let any of 'em get away." Slim rode to the head of his train of wagons, to get out of the storm of dust that they were stirring up, as they headed west, into that scorching wind.

"Hiram, son," said Short. "We never have stooped to anything felonious and awful, but we've got pretty low, son. I hate to say this. We have rid many trails, and been mixed up in some cruel and unusual things, but never anything like this. We are human cowhands. We can't be expected to ride herd on a gang of lunatics like that. I used to think they was no excuse for committing a crime, but now I know they's extenuating circumstances, and this is one of 'em. I—"

"What the hell are you drivin' at?" asked High.

"Well, son, it's just this. We can't go on with that outfit. That fiasco of Duck's has broke my heart, and I wouldn't wonder it jolts something loose about her. Let's rob one of these stores of enough grub to carry us back acrost the desert, and head for Texas. If we live, we can work and make restitution for the grub. If we don't make it— Well, the store people won't be out much."

"Nope," said High. "I don't aim to do rustlin'. I never did, and I won't. You drags me into this, and now, dang yo' long-laigged, half-witted soul, I aim to hold yo' nose and make you swaller it to the last drop. Come on and let's ride. We are supposed to be paired up with Duck and Skinny, and I don't like to be so far from 'em. They might get lonesome, or some gent might try to take 'em away from us. They may be a blind man or two in that herd."

Slim Slater had said that his Owl Head Ranch was just a little way out of town. High and Short knew he was a liar, for they could see twenty miles, and there was nothing but little geysers of wind-blown sand. Beyond that, they could see a blue range of mountains. Somewhere between them and that blue range was the Owl Head. Slim had said that he had to return those people when he got them tanned. That would not be long. They would peel easy before night. It would take them a week to get over it, and then they would tan, suddenly.

Finally, the sun dropped into the desert far ahead of them, like a golden coin going into a slot machine. For the first few miles that gang of nuts had sung "Ki, yippy yi," but now they

were silent. High took one side, and Short the other, and they rode forward to see what they could find out from Slim Slater. They caught up with him, and he snarled at them:

"What the hell you mean quitting the drag? It's goin' to be dark pretty soon, and if any of 'em drops out we'll lose 'em."

"I know," said Short, "but they are raisin' hell for water."

"Shore are," said High, "and I'm sorty dry myself."

"We'll reach a water-hole in about an hour," said Slim. "Then we'll turn 'em out and water 'em. Get on back to the drag, and don't let any get away."

High stopped on one side, and Short on the other. When the wagons had passed they fell in behind them. Duck was still standing, and holding on to the side of the wagon.

"I'll bet that gal's backbone is two inches shorter than it was," grinned High.

"Shut up," growled Short. "I told you not to make slight remarks about a lady. Did you look at 'em close on yo' side, as they passed?"

"Shore did," said High. "Some of 'em is down, but I don't think any is dead yet. Did you notice they eyes?"

"Yes," snapped Short. "They ought to be a law agin shippin' stock thataway. The whites of the eyes are red and the middles of 'em milky from sunburn. They are dang nigh blind, and if Slim don't watch 'em when he turns 'em out, they'll stampede to water, and go over a bluff. It's a plumb damn shame to treat humans like that."

"Humans, hell," jeered High. "Them ain't humans. If they was they'd have more sense than to get into a jam like this. Why do any dang fools want to get tanned? Why do any animals that's got shade and water, and reasonable grass, want to drift out here and suffer? Why don't the law grab 'em when they go nuts, and cage 'em up so they can't butt into things?"

"Hiram, son, I can't answer them questions. I been thinking about this new boss of ours. This Mister Slim Slater. Obvious, he's gettin' paid for what he's doin' to that drove of crazy mavericks. Besides that, they got about a milion dollars worth of fancy saddles and the like. Looks to me like he aims for 'em to die, and let him inherit the mess. If he do, he's just a plumb damn scandal to the name of man, and worse than ary buzzard that ever watched a cow bog up in a dry water-hole, and wait for her to die."

"Well, we can't help it," said High.

"I know we can't, but we could have stole some grub and run out of it, like I wanted to. Looks to me like if they ever ketch this Slim gent, you and me is goin' to be *particeps criminis, multum in parvo,* accessory before the fact, and all that blamed stuff that the lawyers talks about. If we are, we'll be in one more hell of a fix. They'll hang us as many times as they are mavericks in that herd. Let's quit 'em, and go back, High."

"Aw hell, Short," grinned High. "You are seeing things. The heat has got you. Buck up. We'll get to water before long. It can't be far to the Pacific Ocean. We been going west ever since I can remember. Them people ain't goin' to die. They'll be sorty sore for a day or two, and flinch when a fly lights on they withers, but they'll get all right."

"If some of 'em dies, they'll have to be buried, and you and me will have to dig graves, with this sun on our backs," mourned Short.

"Don't worry about that," said High. "The sun is down now, and we can dig the graves in the night time while it's cool. They— Whoa!

Here's the water-hole. Watch 'em pile out and high-tail it for a drink."

That was more than a water-hole, much more. It was Lost River, about a mile above where it disappeared in the sand of the desert. At that point it was rippling over the last little fall at the foot of the hills.

"Crawl out everybody," roared Slim Slater. "Get a drink and stretch yo' laigs."

"When do we eat?" yelled a fool boy.

"When we get home," replied Slim. "It's only a little way now to the Owl Head Ranch, where you'll have all the comforts of a modern palace."

Duck crawled out of the wagon and waddled to water.

"Skin-nay!" she gurgled. "Isn't this just too thrilling for words."

"Listen to that damn fool," grunted High. "She ain't got as much sense as—"

"Hiram, son," said Short, gravely. "Let me remind you again, not to make slighting remarks about ladies."

"Oh, all right," said High. "I won't say no more about 'em, but I aim to think what I damn please. I know what this outfit is, now."

"What is it?" asked Short, as they spurred their weary mounts down the bank to water.

"It's a Thrill Factory, and I got an idea it's just started to grind 'em out. Thrill Factory No. 1, like you see on cigar boxes and caddies of eating tobacco, "Factory 1, Dist. 8," and all like that. If that long-laigged kioty of a Slim Slater ain't careful, he'll get arrested for over-production."

The stop was short. A few minutes later the gang was back in the wagons, and rolling up a beautiful little valley in the foothills. Two miles farther on they came to the Owl Head. There was a little shack that had been the original ranch house. Near the river stood what appeared to be three barns. The first one was the women's barracks, the next one was the cook-shack and general dining room. The third one was the bunkhouse for the men.

"All out!" yelled Slim. "We have reached our happy home. Welcome to Owl Head, and Happy Days valley."

Slim and his two helpers managed to get the sheep separated from the goats, and herd them into their quarters. It was a hard job, for they were all dressed alike. Short gallantly picked up Duck's bundle, and headed for the barracks, while High staggered along behind him, with Skinny's burden. He heard that gurgling again, and wondered if by any chance it might be snake-bite remedy. That barracks was a thing of beauty. There was a roof on it, and the walls were canvas curtains that could be rolled up at will, provided two people took the same notion at the same time. There were two long rows of naked cots in it. The victims were supposed to bring their own bedding. The river was the lavatory and bath room. High and Short escaped from the sanctity of that ladies' bedroom, and went on to unsaddle their horses.

"Short," said High, "I smell boogers. I'll bet you four bits that herd of mavericks stampedes, and gets away from here a damn sight faster than they comes."

"If we got to ride herd on 'em, I hope they run in the night time," growled Short.

CHAPTER III

TROUBLE RIDES

In a few minutes, that starving horde swept into the eating place, which was a long, open shed, except the kitchen and storeroom which was walled in at one end. Down the middle of the shed ran a long table of naked boards. The food was on the table, and looked as if it had been for some time. Shallow pans filled with beef, other shallow pans filled with beans, still other shallow pans filled with dried apples. At intervals

along the table were cans of molasses. A row of plates and knives and forks fringed each side of the festal board. Long benches had been provided for seats. The plates were of tin, and the cutlery and silverware inexpensive. Three dollars would have been a robber's price for the whole outfit. By some strange process, the girls all found their partners, except Duck and Skinny. There was a reason for that. Slim had hunted up High and Short, and said:

"You two boys will have to pack coffee to them hongry varmints."

That statement knocked Old Short speechless. Slim had gone on about other things before he got his breath and growled:

"Hell we will. I don't aim to wait on no table. I'm a cowhand."

"Shut up, fool," said High, in a low tone. "Grab a coffeepot and get busy. That gives us a chance to see what's in that kitchen, and get acquainted with the cook."

One on each side of the table, High and Short poured coffee into tin cups. The coffee was hot enough, but it would keep no one awake. The chaperone, whose name was Madame Montmorency de Trop, stared through her glasses at that mess of provender, and seemed about to faint, but the young rabble in her gang fell to with a will.

"Seems like old Monty is sorty off her feed," grinned High, when he and Short had filled all the cups, and gone to the kitchen.

"I don't blame her," growled Short. "That mess would take a buzzard's appetite. I thought we would at least get some human grub."

"We will," grinned High. "That cook is human, vulnerable, and half drunk. I aim to talk to him some."

The cook was a fat gentleman of middle age, who must have been too heavy on his feet, and unaccustomed to such late hours. At any rate, he wanted to sit down.

"Cookie," said High, "ain't you got no helper?"

"No," wailed the cook, "and they's too much work here for ary one man on earth."

"Shore is," said High. "You just make yo'self comfortable, and rest. We'll handle the rest of this little feed."

The cook said nothing, but stepped through a door into the store room. They heard something that sounded like pouring vinegar out of a jug. He came back wiping his mouth on the back of his hand, and sat down in a chair in one corner of the kitchen. High and Short made another trip with the coffee pots. When they got back, the cook was snoring like a steamboat, and dead to the world.

"Watch the door," said High, "and whistle if you hear a booger coming." The next moment he had disappeared into the store room. He was in there several minutes, and came out with empty hands, but a broad grin on his face. High and Short grabbed the coffee pots, and went back to the dining hall. It was empty. Old Monty had herded the sheep back to the fold, and the goats had gone to their lair. All was silent, save for a few screeches and whines, as the girls tried to remove garments from sunburned backs, which could be heard through the canvas walls of their domicile, and a few solid oaths coming from the men's quarters.

"Hiram, son," said Short, "we can't eat that mess, and live."

"We ain't goin' to eat it," grinned High. "I seen Slim go to that old shack and seek his virtuous couch. Come on here. I'll show you something. Slim keeps his own grub in that storeroom."

They stole around to a window at the back of the store room. A pile of stuff lay on the ground under the window.

"Grab an armful of that, and let's go," said High.

"What is it?" Short asked.

"Things to eat," snapped High.

"What the hell do you think I went into that store room for? I aim to have canned peaches and things. Let's go."

Two hundred yards up the stream from the palace, they sat down on some rocks. High was busy for a moment, until he got a can open. Then he was busier.

"I'd shore like to have a drink of that water," said Short, as he munched some crackers and canned salmon, "but they ain't no place to get down to it."

"I'll give you an empty can in a minute," replied High.

An hour later they crept away to a haystack, spread some hay, and lay down to a well-earned nap.

"Hiram, son, a feller don't need much over him when he sleeps in these mountains, but along about daylight them pore tenderfoots on them cots is goin' to dream that they are on Greenland's Icy Mountains."

"Let the dang fools freeze," muttered High. "Shut up and go to sleep." A moment later they were both snoring.

When the sun rose next morning, High and Short woke and looked about them. About all they could see was the sunny side of the bunk house. The men of that strange company were sitting on the ground in the sun, with blankets around them. They had froze out on the cots. Within ten minutes after the sun rose, they were cooking, and skittered inside. Breakfast was late that morning, for the cook had taken an awful jolt from that jug, and he didn't wake until after sunrise, when Slim came cursing to the kitchen, because he didn't see any smoke from the stove pipe. It was just as well. Nobody wanted any breakfast. It would take them two or three days to digest the mess that they ate the night before. A few of them came for coffee. Only three of the women showed up that day. One was Old Monty. She walked from the tent down to the river and disappeared. She had a bottle of sunburn lotion in each hand, and a wet bath towel tied by two corners around her neck, and hanging down her back. The other two were Duck and Skinny.

Slim had told High and Short to round up the horses. They did, and a harder looking lot of old shells had never been got together. The partners looked them over, and grinned.

"Them hundred-dollar saddles is goin' to look good on these crowbaits," grinned High.

"They'll be safe, though," growled Short. "We won't have to watch none of them pore fools get kilt."

The horses were not needed that day nor the next. Nobody wanted to ride. They were all shedding—or moulting. Slim told the boys to turn the horses back on the range, and round them up when they yelled for them, then he mounted and rode west from the Owl Head.

"I wonder where that long, hungry devil is goin'?" said Short.

"I don't know," replied High, "and I don't care. I aim to find out a few things while he's gone, if I can. This is bound to be a crooked game of some sort that he's playin'. His eyes are cut the wrong way of the leather."

They saw Duck and Skinny stroll across to the dining room, and went there to meet them, and wait on them if they wanted anything, for they knew that the cook had been hitting that jug again, and was sound asleep in the kitchen.

"Listen, fellers—I mean girls," said High. "You two are dead game sports, and we'll show you something, if you promise not to tell. We know where there is a good secret."

"Oh, isn't that thrilling," said Duck. "Of course we won't tell. Take us to it."

The four of them walked away up the river, and stopped on the rocks where High and Short had feasted the night before.

"Sit down on them rocks," said

High. Then he proceeded to serve a feast of sardines and crackers, and canned peaches.

"High," said Skinny, "you are the most wonderful man in the world. Where did you get these things?"

"Never mind where I got 'em," said High. "We have kept you from starving to death for one more day, now I want you to tell us something. What sort of a layout is this that you are with?"

"Well," said Skinny, as she wiped the peach juice from her chin, after drinking from the can, "it is not the kind that we thought it was. These people are all right. They just didn't know any better. Each one of them has paid a hundred and fifty dollars for a season at Owl Head ranch. Two months, if they want to stay that long. All they have is a receipt for the money which guarantees them transportation back to Ganderville, any time they want to go. Madame de Trop was getting up the party, and nobody but nice people could get into it. Duck and I knew there were nice Dude Ranches, so we joined the party, but—"

"You sorty wish you hadn't," said High. "Now, you listen to me. We can't undertake to look out for all these people, but we'll look out for you two, if you'll let us. We never saw Slim Slater until about ten minutes before you saw him, and we don't know anything about him. He hired us, and we thought he wanted us for cowhands. All these folks are apt to have to ride out of here in a hurry some day. They's a coupla horses in his layout that can pack you to Ganderville in one night, and we'll see that you get them. After that, you just stick around where we can see you, and if anything comes up, we'll let you know."

"How perfectly thrilling," said Duck.

"Thrilling, nothing," said Skinny. "It looks like a big bad booger to me. Don't you boys know what's going to happen?"

"We shore don't," said High. "We are just waiting to see."

They took the girls on back to their quarters. That night, as High and Short lay on the hay, High said:

"Short, I can't figger much, but the way I make out, a hundred and fifty bucks a piece, for a hundred people runs around fifteen thousand dollars, and Slim Slater has done got it. He don't aim to give these people fifteen cents' worth of anything. That makes me sore. He has pulled us in on a cold steal, and I don't aim for him to get away with it."

"How you aim to stop him?" growled Short.

"I don't know, but I still got my gun, and I aim to call him the first chance I have. He's done got the fifteen thousand, but we can make him give these folks a run for their money. They could have a plumb good time here, as soon as they shed, and get used to the sun, but he's got to feed 'em like humans."

"Oh, he has?" jeered Short. "Dang your fool soul, you think you can make a leopard change his spots some, do you? I tried to get you to steal some grub, and escape from the wrath to come, and you wouldn't do it. We can't take care of a gang of people that was crazy enough to get pulled in on a deal like this."

"I know it," said High, "but—Aw, hell, Short. Duck and Skinny are a pair of good sports. I'll never ride out of this mess until they get out."

"I won't either," declared Short.

Nothing more was said, just then. Came morning, the cook was sober, and the breakfast was almost human food. Slim came out to breakfast. Even Old Monty ate a little. Toward noon the horses were brought in, and the whole crowd selected mounts and saddled them. High and Short roped out the two best ones for

Duck and Skinny. They all mounted and milled around until noon, then ate and got ready for a real ride. Slim had been insisting that they must go up the valley that afternoon. That they would never appreciate Happy Valley and the Owl Head until they did take that ride. Sorry he could not go with them, but he had to go down the river a ways to drive up some fat yearlings that he meant to butcher for their supper.

"Short," said High, "I'm getting skeered, r i g h t now. That long-laigged, lantern-jawed d e v i l is steering us into something. I aim to kill him, if he do."

"Oh, Slim's all right, I reck'n," said Short. "He just never lived like a human hisself, and don't know how to treat humans. It's up to us to try to give these nuts a little run for their money. We'll take 'em up the valley this afternoon, and—"

"Hello, High and Short!" greeted Duck, as she and Skinny rode up to where they sat their horses. "We are all set to ride, and explore Happy Valley."

"Just a minute," said High. "We can't do nothin' but ride that range, but I want to tell you two girls something. This Owl Ranch outfit has got something the matter with it besides what ails it. We ain't saw nobody about the place except Slim and the cook. It ain't possible for one cook to feed a hundred people regular, with only Short and me to wait on the table."

"Why, of course not," said Skinny, "but what do you think is wrong about the place?"

"Dunno," said High, "but I got a hunch we are going to find out. Here's all I got to say about it. You two girls are sports, and you can ride a gentle horse almost like humans. If anything busts loose, get as many of the others as you can to follow you, and hit the trail for Ganderville. If it comes on toward night, don't let that stop you. The moon is about full, and you couldn't lose the trail. It's the only one they are."

"How thrilling," gurgled Duck.

"Shut up," snapped Skinny. "If High's right, you are likely to get a real thrill before we get away from this place."

They rode away up the valley. It was a beautiful place. A mile above the ranch the valley spread out in a fairly level oval about five miles long, with the river on the east side of it, running south toward the desert. The mountains to the left, and the rugged foothills to their right, across the river, hemmed it in. That hundred riders scattered along the valley, exploring little dells, and stopping in groups under groves of trees, to talk. They had been pretty blue, and sore from sunburn, but now they were beginning to enjoy the outing, and plan all sorts of things that they would do in the next two months.

High and Short, with their partners, pushed on up the valley. About twenty of the more enterprising riders had followed a little way behind them. They came out on a level bit of ground, far toward the head of the valley, and stopped. Two hundred yards ahead of them was a brushy draw. Suddenly, six men rode out of the brush and looked the party over. A moment later one of their guns crashed, and the bullet whined high overhead.

"Oh, oh," said High. "Here's where we do some riding. Come on, let's go from here."

They whirled their mounts and started back down the valley. The little party that was a short way behind them heard that first shot, and stopped. They heard a fusillade of other shots, when High turned his little contingent, and started—the other way.

"Skinny," said High, as they tore

away down the valley, while shots continued to crack behind them, "when we cross the next draw, you take Duck and get away from here. Short and me are going to stop in that draw."

By the time they reached that draw, more than half of the hundred tan-hunters were moving down the valley, wild-eyed, and picking up new recruits to their panic of fright as they went along. High looked back and counted ten of the gun-slingers who were coming on down the valley, firing as they came. At the draw High told the girls to keep going, while he and Short jerked their mounts to a stop and reined under a steep bank.

"Aw, hell, High," said Short, "them fellers is just having a little fun. They been shooting high. They just want to skeer a lot of tenderfoots."

"Yeah?" said High. "Them last few bullets that passed me goin' south weren't high enough. They was just about as high as my head, and not much too wide. If they want to skeer somebody, they done it. I'm skeered dang nigh to death right now, and they ain't no tellin' what I'll do when I'm skeered. I—"

Wham! A gun cracked out on the open ground, and the bullet whined right over their heads, cutting the brush on the top of the bank.

"Hey!" yelled one of the pursuers. "What the hell you shooting into them brush for?"

"Want to run out the stragglers," replied the man who had fired the shot. "Slim said to skeer hell out of 'em, but not kill any if we could help it."

"High, did you hear that?" growled Short.

"Shore I heard it, and I'm skeered. If we ride out of here now, them gents will smoke us like a ham. They—" The upper end of a man and a horse's back showed above the bank a little way down the draw, where the trail came down. High's gun cracked, and the man shot from the saddle and fell to the ground.

"What's the matter with you?" growled Short. "You killed that gent deader'n a mackerel."

"I know it," grinned High. "I'm skeered so bad I can't run. All I can do is fight. If you aim to run from that flock of buzzards, you better do it, for it's going to be too late to run in about another second."

It was already too late. The gang had seen their leader go down, and they poured a hail of lead into that thicket, that sounded like bees swarming.

"Short," said High, "I reck'n this is Custer's Last Stand. Them gents is mad at us about something. We got to hold 'em back awhile, until Duck and Skinny has a chance to get away. I think they can make the twenty-five mile to Ganderville in about fifteen minutes, the way they was going when they went out of sight. They—"

Whang! Short's old forty-five roared, the muzzle bounded up, and a man bounced down, from his saddle.

"Hold yo' temper, Short," grinned High. "Don't get mad. Them gents is just having some fun with a lot of tenderfoots."

"Shore," growled Short. "If we ever let that pack of kiotys get down into this draw, we're goin' to be newcomers in heaven, standin' on one foot and lookin' silly. Back in under that bank a little more, can't you? That last bullet just missed me the thickness of my shirt."

The men on the bank, whether bent on fun or a funeral, were pouring lead into that draw now, and they were not shooting too high, either. It was an exceedingly warm spot just then.

"Hiram," said Short, "this is what comes of bein' ungallant, and abandoning a lady in peril."

"Ungallant, hell," grinned High. "When a ship sinks they let the ladies go first, and our women has

damn shore went. I wish I hadn't been so damn polite, and had went with 'em. I'm skeered until I'm shakin' like—"

Wham! Wham! Wham! High was scared, now, and not responsible for what he did. He had stepped out from the bank, until he could see over it, and shot three men in three seconds. Then he sprang back under the bank and slipped fresh cartridges into his gun. There was a babel of voices out there in the open, now, as the attackers stood in a group.

"Come on," said High. "We got 'em trimmed some, let's crawl up the bank and see what they are doing?"

When they peered over the bank they saw something that stopped them for a moment. Four of the ten men were dead. The other six were in a close group, two of them badly wounded. That was not what stopped High and Short. The booger they saw was Slim Slater. He was storming toward the group on that fancy horse of his, and cursing like a madman. He skidded to a stop, and yelled:

"What the hell are you doin'? I told you to just skeer them folks, and—"

"Yeah," snapped one of the four sound ones, "but you didn't tell us the United States Army was with 'em. They's a coupla regiments in that draw, and—"

"Here goes Mister Slater," grinned High. "I hate to waste a ca'tridge on him, but he's been here too long. If you want any more, help yourself."

High's gun barked. Slim Slater's fancy horse reared, turned, and Slim Slater shot from the saddle. He would never again run a Dude Ranch. Short crippled two more, as they broke and fled. Just then a band of twenty men came storming down the valley, met the fleeing remnant of Slim's little army, and engulfed them.

"Reload, quick," said High. "Looks like we might have to fight, yet, before this mess is over."

The party of men came on, bringing the prisoners with them. Peering through the bushes at the top of the bank, High and Short could see that they were a party of natural cowhands, led by a gray-haired old giant of a ranchman.

"Huh. Got the whole damned outfit," grunted the ranchman. "Who the hell do reck'n done it? Hey, you in the draw. Come out here."

"We're skeered too bad to walk," called High.

"What the hell are you skeered of? You got the whole outfit except three, and we aim to hang them at the first tree we come to."

High and Short walked out."

"Where's the rest of you?" asked the ranchman.

"They ain't no rest for the wicked," said High. "This is all they are of us. We wouldn't done that, but we was skeered some."

Then old Short told the story of their adventure on a Dude Ranch. His statement that they were natural cowhands was taken for truth. His graphic description of their delusion, and how they had been awakened from it, caused the ranchman and his hands to roar with laughter.

"Well," said the old ranchman, wiping tears of laughter from his eyes, "we have been figuring for a year or two that Slim Slater was a nest-egg for thieves and killers. We didn't know nothin' about his easy money scheme, but we trail that gang in here, and—We're mighty much obliged to you gents. We ain't got no business any farther down the valley. We'll just load these fellers and take 'em over the pass with us. The sheriff will pay us right smart for some of 'em."

"Then I reck'n we better ramble on," said High. "Slim hired us to ride herd on them mavericks, and the last we seen of 'em, they was scattered some."

A few minutes later, High and

Short mounted their old sunfishers, and rode away down the valley.

"There goes a pair of lead-slinging hellions," growled the old ranchman. "Maybe we ought to have took them, too, but I got an idea that the gent that picks one of 'em up is apt to burn his fingers."

CHAPTER IV

GOODBYE GIRLS

Aside from a few gloves, one boot, and some scraps of clothing on the brush, High and Short saw nothing until they reached the Owl Head. In fact, they didn't see much there. Slim and his gang had thrown a scare into the dudes that would last them until they reached the Atlantic seaboard, and some were in danger of drowning, unless somebody milled them. A few had halted long enough to snatch such of their belongings as they could carry. It was almost sunset when High and Short reached the ranch. High dismounted near the cookshack.

"Hiram, son," said Short, "we mustn't stop. Remember, Duck and Skinny are in that wild stampede. I have grown attached to Duck, and I know you think a lot of Skinny. You said they was a pair of dead game sports, and you was right."

"Shore I like Skinny," grinned High, "but I like canned peaches, too, and I aim to have some more before I leave here."

High went into the kitchen. The fat cook was drunk, and snoring in his corner. High went on to the store room. He came out presently, with his arms full of canned goods, crackers, sugar, and whatever he could find. He set them on the long table, and invited Short to fall to. As High wielded the can-opener, he became philosophical.

"Short," he said, "I heared a preacher read somethin' in the Bible one time, and it went something like this: 'Eat, drink, and be comfortable, for it's a damned long way east of here to where they's any more grub and whiskey.' Push them crackers over here."

The sun had been down some time, and the wind was getting a bit cooler when High and Short filled their canteens at the crossing of Lost River, then spurred their old broncs out onto the desert trail. They had ridden several miles, when Short spoke:

"Hiram, son, what makes humans so onreasonable? Take Slim Slater, he—"

"Aw hell, Short. Don't take him. He weren't no human."

"No, I reck'n not, Hiram, but—Take anything that wears pants and boots and the like. They can't be happy, and let well enough alone. Ary man that couldn't be happy in that valley, with the murmuring river, and the blue mountains, moonlight and all. Why he—he's just plain crazy, that's all. Now me—"

"You're damn shore touched with the heat," said High. "I've heared you babble like a brook or two plenty of times, but this is the first time I ever heared you see things like that before."

"Hiram, son my heart has been touched. I didn't know it myself until I seen Duck tear away down that valley. I wanted to follow her, but something told me I could do more for her by stayin' with you in that draw. Now, I'm all afire to ketch up with her, and see that she makes it to Ganderville without no trouble."

"Hell, Short, she's in New York by now, if she held the gait she was goin' when she went out of sight."

"Don't be levitous, Hiram. This is a sad moment for me, and one of Washington's Rules of Conduct was 'Laugh with them that is tickled, and wail with them that wails,' or words to that effect. I'm right smart on the wail tonight. Think of it, Hiram, that same old moon up there is shinin' on Duck, as she plods across the desert. I wonder if she's thinkin' of me."

"She might be," grinned High, "but

I'll bet you four bits, at least, that them mavericks has run clean out from under the moon by this time."

"Hiram, this eppysode may be a source of amusement to you, but it is a source of sadness to me. Think of it. If Slim hadn't been so damned ornery, we might of stayed on there two months with that pair of sports. By that time we might of persuaded 'em to marry us. Then we could of killed Slim, natural, took the valley, and made a coupla happy homes of it. You could have had the old shack, for you and Skinny, and Duck and me could of tore down the cook shack and built us a place farther up the valley. That's the way it always is. When a man is as cussed mean as Slim Slater was, he don't know how many people he's hurting, how many lives he's apt to wreck and ruin."

"Hush, Short," begged High. "Don't make me cry. The tears and this damned desert dust mixed will make me look like hell when we ketch up with the girls, and I'd like to look my best."

"You shore ought to," said Short. "You'll look like hell anyway, but it would be better to have yo' face clean."

"Yeah," said High. "Well I don't know whether anybody ever told you about it. Folks don't like to talk to a feller about his afflictions and deformities, it ain't polite, but— You don't look like no damn chrome of a prize beauty yo'self."

"Hiram, son," sighed Short. "Don't let's quarrel. Nary one of us ain't pretty enough for them two wonderful girls. Let's spur up and see can we ketch 'em."

The east was pink as a blushing bride, and promising a sun that was hotter than the fiery furnace, when High and Short came in sight of Ganderville. They jogged on toward the town. Far off to their right, and behind them, they heard the hoarse whistle of a train, and spurred on. The train ran into Ganderville, and stopped with a grinding of brakes when they were yet a quarter of a mile from the station. They reached it, but not in time. The train was moving when they ran through the little red station, and the wheels were clicking over the switch frogs. Duck and Skinny, faithful to the last, stood on the rear platform. As they saw High and Short, they each threw a kiss, and a little package. High and Short threw kisses and waved until the train was lost in the heat waves, then each picked up his package. Short's contained a beautiful silk handkerchief that Duck had worn, and which Short had admired.

"Keep this to remember me by—Duck."

So read the little note. High's package was of another sort. It was much smaller. So small, in fact, that a handful of desert sand had to be placed in the envelope to keep it from blowing away. High opened it and read:

"Take this, and buy some canned peaches. Good luck—Skinny."

"This" was a hundred dollars in bills. High rolled it up reverently, and pushed it down into his trousers pocket.

"Hiram, son," said Old Short, "opportunity knocked, and we weren't at home. Never again will we be so near real happiness."

"Aw, hell, Short. We're all right. If you had got Duck, you would have been hump shouldered before yo' time, stoopin' to kiss her, and if I had got Skinny I'd of had to borrow Romeo's ladder. Buck up. Come on here. Let's fill our canteens, water our braunks, buy some groceries and head for Texas."

Two hours later, the heat waves were making two little specks jump up and down, far out on the desert to the east of Ganderville. Those specks were High and Short.

GENTLING COLTS

By
E. W.
THISTLETHWAITE

Illustrated by the Author

Throw A Saddle On This One—An Authentic Article On Horses And The Men Who Break Them, Written By A Man Who Has Tamed His Share Of Bad Ones.

The subject of gentling colts is one that I've been trying to get at now for about three months. The trouble is, I start off on something else and the first thing I know my time—or rather space—is up and I haven't even got started! I guess there's a jinx on me or something, but I'm going to beat it this time by starting in on that colt subject right away!

Before we start any actual breaking, let's just say a word or two first about the man and then about the colt.

Although the man will undoubtedly wear high heeled riding boots, a Stetson hat and all that goes between, it is quite possible that he may not be an actual cowboy. He may call himself a horse breaker, a bronc rider, a bronc "peeler," "snapper" or "stomper" or just a "rider." He knows all about horses and he may know something about cows, but chances are he don't.

Most of the really good horse breakers I have known, grew up in the business. That is, their fathers were horse breakers before them, and they themselves started in to ride when mere kids. For example, Ed Bowman—of contest fame—was snapping broncs for a cow outfit at the tender age of thirteen! And them Arizona broncs are *broncs*—no foolin'!

I don't wish you to infer from this that only men raised in the business turn out to be good breakers. It is a trade that can be learned, if you have the guts. There is a lot more to it, however, than merely stepping onto a colt and keeping it between your legs—difficult as that sometimes is! That is why many a contest rider who can "scratch hell out of anything that wears hair" is almost useless when it comes to breaking a colt so other people can ride it.

Looking at it the other way, lots of top horse breakers who can handle the wildest colt that ever came out

of the mountains, couldn't even qualify in any bucking contest in the country.

One of the chief difficulties to be encountered in the process of gentling a colt is the *elimination of fear*—and that goes for the man as well as the colt. A man may overcome his fear sufficiently to walk up to a colt and pick up its feet, but even so, the colt's instinct tells him that the man is afraid and chances are the animal will kick or strike.

On the other hand a man who, through long association, understands horses so well that he is without fear of them, can walk up to a colt and pick its feet up in almost perfect safety.

To make a good horse breaker then, you should have understanding and that comes only after years of experience. A thorough understanding is tantamount to an absolute lack of fear. The next best thing is, of course, a little understanding and lots of guts. Guts alone might make you a rough rider, but that's all.

Speaking of rough riders brings to mind the old range days when colts were actually "busted." A bronc buster would go into a corral with his saddle in one hand and a club in the other and he'd come out with a colt between his legs—provided he didn't kill it before he got his saddle on. He'd then ride it on a dead run till it give out, then he'd kick and spur and beat it back to the corral. Next day the poor pony would be too stiff and sore to put up much resistance and the same thing would be repeated. After three or four days of this the horse was "broke."

Of horses broke in this fashion, about one in ten would turn out good, three or four would be passable and the rest spoiled. That's a mighty poor average, of course, but horses were cheap and plentiful and nobody cared a damn about 'em anyway, so they just busted what they could and killed the rest.

There are still parts of the country where horses are broke like that, but where men ride *good* horses, quite a bit of care is taken in their breaking. Horse breakers, of course, all have their own individual ideas and methods, a thorough explanation and comparison of which would fill a book. We have space here for a mere sketch of the general procedure.

Well, so much for the bronc buster—now a word about the bronc!

There are two kinds of colts. One is the wild range colt and the other what you might call "barn raised."

I don't mean by that one that was actually raised in the barn, but a horse whose mother, maybe, was broke and who growed up among broke horses. A colt like that—one used to seeing men around, both afoot and a-horseback—is usually much easier to break than the range horse or wild mustang that don't see a human, except as a speck in the distance, from one year to the next.

Of course some of these barn raised colts are a little "snaky" at first. Just the other day, for example, I run in a little two-year-old, out of a mare of mine that has been "lady broke" for five or six years.

The correct age at which to break a colt, by the way, is four years. That's the age when a horse reaches maturity, or, as we say, "gets his growth." I just wanted this particular colt gentled down a little and broke to lead.

I run him into a big corral made of woven wire, seven feet high on three sides and boards about six feet high separating it from a chute and squeeze on the fourth side—then I went in afoot with my rope.

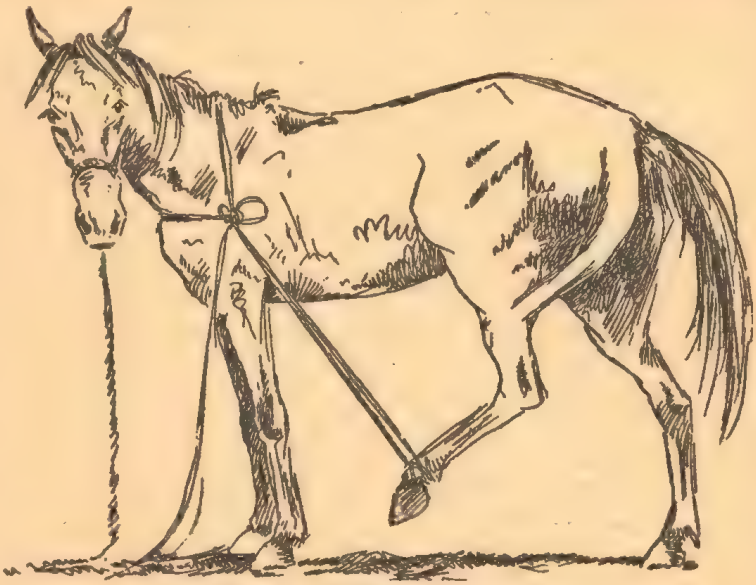
Now that colt had seen me around ever since he was born. Many a time he'd been as close as ten or fifteen feet, yet when he found himself alone in a corral with me he went plumb loco.

He tried to jump that seven foot fence ten times in less than a minute, getting half over sometimes, only to

be throwed back by the spring of the stiff wire. Then he jumped the board fence into a little trap that leads to the chute.

By this time he looked like he'd been in a train wreck. His head and neck were skinned up to beat hell. He'd a big cut on one shoulder—and I hadn't even made a cast at him, I'd merely stood and watched!

Well, he was looking so tough I thought I'd just doctor his skinned places and let him go for the time, so I run him into a little section of chute maybe twelve feet long and five wide. Then I tied a little brush on the end of a stick and mixed up a can of dope—grease with a little sheep dip to keep the flies off.



The author uses this method to tie up a colt before sacking him out.

I knew blame well he couldn't jump out of there because he couldn't make a run and the sides were over six feet tall. But when I got on the fence with my can of dope, that damn colt just *climbed* out like a dog-gone monkey, balanced on the top rail a second and then went over on his head! In the end, I had to forefoot him and tie him down before I could doctor him.

The next time I handled him, however, he acted real nice. He'd found out I wasn't trying to kill him. Now I doubt if he ever bucks when I eventually ride him.

Well, to get down to our actual breaking—

First of all you run your colt into a pen by himself. A round pen is best, because you can stand in the middle and be within roping distance of the horse all the time, also he's not so liable to run into the fence and hurt himself.

Now you take your lariat or "ketch rope" and snare him by both front feet (the peculiar cast used in forefooting an animal was described in our last article). In throwing a colt this way, care should be taken to jerk his feet out sideways. If you're directly behind him and pull his feet back under him, he's apt to break his neck in the fall.

At this point, a little assistance comes in mighty handy to hold him down, although, of course, a good man can get along by himself. In one of our earlier articles, if you remember, I explained that the way to hold a cow or steer down is to kneel on its back—your feet on the ground, of course, and hang onto the tail which you have pulled between its hind legs. To hold a horse down, you bear down on its neck with one knee and with both hands hold its nose against your chest. He can't get up so long as you keep his nose off the ground.

While he's down, you slip on your hackamore or halter and either hobble his front feet or tie up one hind foot.

A good thing to use for hobbles is a three-quarter-inch cotton rope that has been untwisted and braided—which makes it very soft and also flat.

You simply put it around one leg, a little below the knee, twist it several times, then tie it round the other leg.

Myself, I prefer tying up a hind foot. A three-quarter-inch cotton rope is used here too, by the way, but it is left twisted. First, tie a large loop—one that won't slip—around the horse's neck, arranging it so the knot (that commonly known as a "bowlin" is the best) sets back on one shoulder. Next, flip the long end around a hind leg just below the ankle joint and tie the end into the neck loop, just short enough so the foot, when the animal is standing, will be three or four inches off the ground. If the rope is a new one, by the way, two or three inches must be allowed for stretching.

If the knot of the neck loop comes on the left shoulder, I tie up the left foot and vice versa, but some horse breakers prefer to tie up the opposite foot, drawing it under the animal's belly. In order to prevent his kicking out of the rope, it is usually necessary to take an extra turn about the ankle or twist the rope back on itself. Don't attempt to put a half hitch on the ankle. It'll stay *bueno*, but you'll play hell trying to get it off again!

At this point the colt is allowed to get on his three feet and you proceed to sack him out. This process consists quite simply of hanging on to the lead rope with one hand while you beat him over the head and shoulders with a gunny sack or a piece of old blanket.

To a colt, a sack looks every bit as formidable as a club and the idea is to show him that although a thing may look dangerous as hell, it don't necessarily hurt. This sacking is important, and does more to gentle a colt than anything else.

The next step is to break your colt to lead. There are probably a dozen methods of doing this, many of them both stupid and brutal—but the following is one of the best I know.

Take a small rope, say about three-eighths diameter with a slip noose like a lariat and put the loop over the colt's head, running it between his ears, close to the left one, arranging it so that the eye or honda—which should be of metal—is on the upper side. See sketch. Now stand back ten feet or so and pull gently on the rope for a few seconds, then slack up. With your hand, rub the colt between the ears, under the rope. That's where it hurts.

You may have to keep this up, alternately pulling and rubbing, for five or ten minutes before the pony takes a single step. When he *does* take a step, slack up right away and he'll learn that he can make it quit hurting just by taking a step forward. Once he gets that idea well into his head, he'll come right along.

The idea in using a metal honda rather than a tied loop such as is used on a lariat, is that it slacks up better. The rope runs through it easier.

Once a horse is broke to lead you can ride him and teach him the use of reins while doing so, or you can first use a bitting harness. This is merely a rig designed to hold the reins back—one on each side—so a colt can't turn his head without turning his body. If no regular bitting harness is available, the reins may be tied back to the rigging rings on a saddle. A plain bit of the driving or snaffle variety is used, of course, not a riding bit. If no bitting harness has been used, a colt is likely to go straight ahead with you even though you pull his head plumb around.

A horse like that, that won't turn, can sometimes be made to do so by holding your hat over one eye or batting one side of his face with your hat. He turns away from it, of course.

Another good way of getting a colt to rein is to carry a quirt with wide tails—2 inches or so—and pop him on the side of the neck when you turn him. The wide lash does not

cut, but it pops like a gun and scares him.

Some colts are hard to climb on at first; in which case, if you're working alone, a blind is sometimes useful. This may be attached to the hackamore or bridle in the form of a wide brow band (as shown in so many of the late Charles M. Russell's paintings) or it may be quite separate and held in place by a throat latch of its own. See drawing. If necessary, a hind leg may be tied up to enable you to mount and let down after you get on.

This is a good rig for teaching a colt to lead. The author explains it in the article.

It's a good idea before you actually ride a colt, to tie a foot up, saddle him, then climb on and off and in fact all over him till he gets quite used to it.

Well, I guess that's enough to give you a pretty fair idea of the general method of breaking a colt. There is one thing you want to remember, and that is a colt can learn just one thing at a time and you have got to teach him one thing *good* before you start in on something else.

I expect that the above all sounds very simple and easy, but don't get the idea that anybody can break a colt. It *does* take guts. Getting right down to cases, it's a question of bluff and if you don't bluff the colt he'll bluff you! I'll just give you a true incident or two to illustrate this point.

Some years ago, a couple of fellows brought in a carload of broncs from Nevada, put them in a corral, right here on the ranch, and advertised horses for sale. I might mention here that these horses were all wild range stock from the mountain desert and not in any sense "barn raised" as are all our local colts. Also one of the men with the horses was a bronc snapper and he was from the mountain desert too!

Well, an acquaintance of mine, who had broke a few colts in his time, was looking for a big, stout, "all day" horse, and he picked one out of this bunch. It was a white gelding that would weigh around 1,300 I guess.

It had been agreed that every horse sold was to be rode in the presence of the buyer, so this bronc snapper goes out with his rope, catches this "Chalkey" horse, slaps on his saddle and rides him round the corral. It was all as easy as that. Of course my friend thought he'd got a horse that was two-thirds broke and he bought it right away.

Well, he was kind of busy at the time and didn't get a chance to handle his new colt for two or three weeks. Then one day he gets his rope and saddle and goes over to the corral where old Chalkey is.

What happened then was sure funny. You see he thought he could do just as this bronc snapper had done, rope the old pony, slap his hull on and ride it. He got his rope on it all right, but that's as far as he got, because Chalkey just came right after him, with his mouth open! Well, that friend of mine is quite a runner, and he got to the fence just in time. As it was, old Chalkey got in one swipe at him with a front foot and ripped his shirt from the collar to where it was tucked into his pants. Took off a little skin too, I remember.

If that hombre had gone right back into that corral with a club and put up a stronger bluff than the old pony, he'd have had a good saddle horse by now, but he just didn't have the guts.

Instead, he turned him out and after a year or two, sold him—for ten or fifteen bucks, I believe, to be tried out as a bucker in a rodeo contest. When rode by a real bronc scratcher, the horse did not buck, by the way.

Sometimes a colt will get in his bluff after he's been handled quite a while.

Last summer, for example, another acquaintance of mine turned a colt over to a Mexican to break. Well, this Mex fooled around with it for a month or so and finally let it go. He didn't have guts enough to ride it for some reason, although as far as I know, it always acted gentle.

After it had run out a month or so, I corralled it, just for fun, saddled it up and rode it two or three miles. It never made a move.

It acted so nice and gentle with me, that when another friend of mine wanted something to ride, he contracted to finish breaking this old pony if the owner would furnish the feed for it.

Well, he rode it a week or so and it never attempted to make a jump till one day something or other scared it and it shied. It wasn't much of a shy—just a little jump sideways, but as luck would have it, it took this fellow off his guard and he went off on his head.

I was right there at the time, so I caught it and brought it back and my friend got on again. But the mischief was done. That horse had learned, or *thought* he had, that all he had to do to get rid of his rider was jump. He did jump about an hour later, not only jumped but *bucked*, and my friend, who was not only out of practice, but riding a borrowed saddle, got throwed again, although he made a good ride. So the old pony got away again—clean back to his home range this time.

Well, this friend of mine wasn't bluffed out, but circumstances called him away right after that and the horse ran out for another couple of months, till another friend of mine undertook to try him out. The first time he rode him, the old pony bucked of course and the rider went off. Sounds like a bunch of crummy riders, don't it?—but getting throwed just made this guy peeved.

Up to now, every time that colt had bucked, he'd lost his rider, and he was beginning to look upon himself as one bad horse. That, of course, had to be taken out of him, so this fellow took him into the middle of a plowed field—where the going was hard, and, incidentally, the "lighting," if it came to that, soft. Then, with quirt and spur he kicked that old pony out till he couldn't jump. After that, for quite a while he had one good horse. A kid could ride him.

Then one day old Diamond—that's what we named the colt—tried another bluff.

We were riding in the mountains, making our own trail down an exceptionally steep hill—it was just about straight off, in fact—I was well in the lead, as I have an exceptionally good mountain horse, when suddenly I heard a "whoop and a holler" and a great smashing of brush and looked up to see old Diamond coming down that mountain fifty feet to a jump!

My friend had lost his hat and a stirrup or two, but he was still on top as they passed me like a bat out of hell and he was on top when they got to the bottom of the cañon, a thousand feet below!

That's one colt that got in a good bluff for a while but was outbluffed before he had time to get spoiled. He's plumb lady broke now, but if he'd throwed a few more men he always would have been a bucker.

You'll notice above that I've used the word "spoiled." That is the correct term to use in reference to at least nine out of ten so-called "mean" horses. I say "nine out of ten," but ninety-nine out of a hundred would be nearer the truth. About one horse out of a hundred is naturally mean.

You can tell him by the fact that his forehead *bulges* between the eyes. The rest, the horses that buck and kick and strike and bite, were made that way through inefficiency or cruelty on the part of the men who first rode them.

Well, I guess that's enough about colts for one time and I see I'm getting pretty near the end of my allotted space. We have room for a little more, however, and I believe I'll answer a few question that came in the mail just the other day. The questions, by the way, come from some jasper at Winside, Nebraska, but he forgot to sign his name so I can't send a personal reply. I do reply personally to anybody who cares to send a stamp, however.

All right, question number one is: *What do cowboys do when not on roundup?*

Well, that depends quite a bit on the country. On an unfenced range there's line riding to be done, keeping the cattle from drifting onto adjoining ranges. Then there's looking after the water supply. This is quite a problem in most parts of the cow country. Springs have to be dug out, pipe line laid, water troughs fixed up. Calves missed in the roundup have to be caught and branded; cattle moved to better feed; salt put out. Sometimes cattle die from contagious diseases and have to be buried or burned. Some outfits break their own horses and the cowboys snap out a bunch every fall. In the winter, if there is snow, weak stock has to be brought in and fed; occasionally a plow is made and snow scraped aside so the range cattle can get at the grass (cattle don't "paw" for it like horses do). These, and approximately nine thousand six hundred and fifty-seven other things keep the cowboys tolerably busy between roundups.

In case you are working alone you may want to use this simple blind, enabling you to climb onto the colt's back.

Next: *Do cowboys still carry guns?*

Well, in some parts of the country, yes. A cowboy on the open range has about the same uses for a gun now as he had seventy-five years ago.

Do they own their own horses?

The ranch owner supplies horses for all the work, but a cowboy may keep his own "top" horse to ride to town on and a pack horse for his bed when he quits to hunt another job or rides on to a new range.

Do they live in bunk houses? Describe.

Yes and bunk houses vary somewhat. Sometimes they're made in one long room with bunks each side, two high, and sometimes each man or each two men have a separate room with cots. A regular bunk house is always made long and narrow. On a small outfit, where there are only two or three men, any old shack where they sleep is referred to as "the bunk house." Literally, it means any old place with bunks inside.

What do cowboys do when they're too old to work?

I guess about the same as anybody else.

What is the pay?

Anywhere from your board and smoking to a hundred and fifty a month.

Is there any chance for a man to get a job breaking work horses in any of the Western states?

Well, on cow outfits they don't use much work stock but quite a few work horses are used in the West generally, and a good man could probably get to break quite a few. I would pick out a *farming* rather than a stock

country, though. A really good bronc snapper, of course, can get a job almost any time. You have to be good, though.

Are there any fence riders?

Yes, on fenced ranges there are quite a few. Mostly, though, they are old men or kids. It's a good job to get if you want to learn to be a cowboy, as you'd get a chance to actually "punch" cows during the roundup.

Is there any chance for an inexperienced rider getting a job?

Not much, I'm afraid, right now. The cattle business is on the rocks and lots of good cowboys are working for their board. In normal times a man with ambition and guts can get to be a cowboy—and a good one too.

Well, that's all the questions, folks, and as our time's up, I'll be rolling along. Next month I'll have something to say about the old Texas saddles that were developed from the Mexican saddle I have drawn for this issue. Well, *adios* for now.

Here she is, the saddle Pancho Villa used to ride. This type is still widely used below the border.

SAM BASS TACTICS

Sam Bass, gunman extraordinary of the old West, whose personal record of achievement, as one of his biographers has said, "has probably inspired more young Texans to deeds of devilment than that of any other prominent and admired Lone Star hero," was the leader of the gang of six that performed in the fall of 1877 the biggest train robbery ever staged up until that time. Before this particular coup which made Bass famous, the gang had been robbing coaches, but finding their hauls just chicken feed they decided to stage something really big. The "something really big" was a train hold-up. The date was September 19, 1877.

When the train stopped at Big Springs, Nebraska, the gang boarded it, went systematically through the passenger coaches where they gathered about $5,000, and then entered the express car. There they found boxes filled with $20 gold pieces, and loading themselves down they escaped uninjured. Sam Bass' share came to $19,000, and as the five other men must have gotten the same, the total haul was around $114,000.

The gang hid their swag and went boldly back to the town of Ogallala, where they had previously stopped for several days, in order to equip themselves properly for the journey back to Texas. A young clerk in a supply store became suspicious, followed them when they left town and eventually saw the money divided. When he returned to Ogallala he informed the authorities as to what he had discovered.

While the clerk was returning, the gang separated. Collins and Hefferidge were to head for San Antonio, Berry and Underwood for Missouri, and Sam Bass and Davis for Denton. Collins and Hefferidge were caught in Buffalo Station and were shot while trying to escape. Davis and Bass, however, were more shrewd. They traded off their ponies for a flea-bitten pair of grays and a dilapidated old wagon with wobbly wheels. They tied their share of the booty in their old pants legs and threw them carelessly under the seat.

Everywhere they camped they were questioned as to whether they had seen anyone who answered to their own description. Bass always assured the officials they had not. One night they even camped with a posse that was searching for them, and swapped stories of what they would do if they met the bandits on the road.

LAST ROUNDUP

By CLIFF WALTERS

Branded "A Stove-In Hoss Ready For Coyote Bait," The Old Puncher Galloped To The Tune Of A Bullet Ballad On Killer's Range.

For two days the sound of horse-shoeing hammers, mingled with the wary snorts of half-broken cayuses, had echoed through the corrals of the Churndash outfit. Chains clanked as the cook hooked his lead bar on the chuck wagon; leather-complexioned cowpunchers bandied one another; hoofs pounded the earth with a thud of activity. All the noises were music to old Brock Lanning, the spread's oldest hand, because they meant that spring roundup would be starting with tomorrow's dawn.

Old Brock, whose kindly gray eyes seemed to reflect the tranquillity and color of the sage-silvered hills, smiled as he mopped his brow and looked away toward the slope of Chain Mountain, the summer range belonging to the Churndash. Pausing to rest for a moment after clinching the last nail in the last hoof of Cap, his own buckskin horse, he stood there musing on the distant vista.

He recognized every butte and draw; could visualize every camping ground; and mentally heard the cheerful tinkle of cavvy bells and smelled the dust of bawling herds. What he really heard, however, was the jingle of a spur rowel. He turned to see middle-aged Sam Harlow, the owner of the outfit, standing beside him.

"Hello, Brock," the latter greeted casually. "Been tacking some shoes on old Cap, have you?"

"Sure." The old puncher's face lighted with a grin. "And far as that's concerned, Sam, I could've shod the other five horses in my string. I always have."

"Swim, Cap Pony!" gasped Brock, fighting hard to balance the game little horse against the treacherous current.

"Yeah, I know." Harlow scratched his head meditatively. "But I thought we might as well let young Rusty Prine shoe that string, Brock. You see, he's young and husky—and—and

anyhow — well, doggone it, Brock, somebody's got to go to Torchlight after them twenty head of bulls I'm shippin' in. They'll be unloaded at the yards tomorrow."

"You mean—you want me to go to Torchlight—tomorrow?"

"Why, yeah." Harlow's eyes evaded those of the old puncher. "I've got a whale of a lot of money tied up in those bulls, Brock. Four hundred dollars apiece. That's eight thousand altogether. And I want somebody that I can depend on to—"

The smile faded on the older man's weather-lined face as he said, "I see. Then, for the first time in twenty-six years, I ain't ridin' the Churndash roundup. You're sendin' young Rusty Prine in my place. He'll be ridin' my old string of horses, and I'll be taggin' along, two miles an hour, behind a bunch of registered bulls that a ten-year-old kid could lead with a halter."

"Well," the uncomfortable Harlow faltered, "you know how it is, Brock. Gol-lee. It ain't goin' to seem the same—tryin' to run a roundup without you along. But all of us gets old sooner or later—"

Brock didn't hear the rest of what the boss was saying. The old puncher was noticing the triumphant look in young Rusty Prine's pale blue eyes as the latter, his husky back bent over the hoof between his knees, shot a sharp, gloating glance toward the two speakers. Maybe that was why old Brock accepted his fate with a minimum display of emotion.

"You don't have to hedge around about it, Sam," he said with his characteristic calm. "Gray hairs is no disgrace. And if you figger that I can't take the bumps on a roundup any longer—well—that's up to you."

"I only wish I could put your cow-sense into some young buck's cranium, Brock. I—I guess I should've told you sooner about—"

"That's all right, Sam." And even if Brock Lanning's heart felt like it had suddenly turned to lead, he forced a smile into his wrinkles. "You didn't have to bother about that bull-herdin' business, either — to kinda relieve things. I've got enough saved up to buy a log shack and a few acres of horse pasture somewhere that'll—"

"Don't say that, Brock!" The low voice of the cattleman was vibrant with sincerity. Then, motioning the old puncher to follow him around the corral, and beyond hearing distance from young Rusty Prine, Harlow went on, "Don't think you're leavin' the Churndash outfit, old timer. This place wouldn't seem like home to me without you around. And, doggone your old hide, you know that no place else'll ever seem like home to you."

"I'm not askin' for no pension, Sam."

"Nor I ain't offerin' you one," the other promptly retorted. "You can look after the ranch while I'm out on the roundup. And you can trail them eight thousand dollars' worth of bulls up here from the railroad. And you can keep on ridin' the old dead line over there." He pointed to the dark green line of cottonwoods fringing the banks of Chain Creek, the stream dividing the Churndash range from that of the large—and hostile—Wyomont Cattle Company. "Which reminds me, cowboy. For gosh sake don't let none of them bulls stray while you're stoppin' over night at Bowl Springs on your way home."

The elderly man grinned. "You sure are a good sham battler, Sam. Tryin' to salve me into thinkin' that I'm takin' a lot of responsibility, and doin' a whole heap by beatin' some kid out of a bull herdin' job. Huh! As if them one-ton, two-mile-an-hour animules might stampede across Chain Crick and have somethin' happen to 'em! Nope." He shook his gray head slowly. "Yo're just bein' white like you always was, and like your dad was, Sam, but you ain't foolin' me none."

"At the same time," the frank-eyed Harlow answered, "I ain't fool enough to believe that I can ever pay you off

in either pension or wages for all you've done for this outfit, old timer. What about the time that herd of dogies got snow-trapped in Carcass Canyon? The time the two fellers with you got froze out — and you brought that herd out alone? Yeah, and with your feet froze stiff! And how about the time the skunks across the crick tried burnin' our stacks of wild hay and— But shucks! I couldn't name all of 'em if I tried."

"Aw, forget 'em, Sam."

"I can't forget 'em," the cattleman replied. "Nor I ain't forgettin' how you got that scar alongside your jaw the day Dad was killed. The day you and him got cornered by them four Wyomont riders."

Young Rusty Prine came sauntering around the corral to say: "Hey, Mr. Harlow! The cayuses is all shod."

"All right, Rusty," Harlow called. "Hop on a horse and haze 'em down to the pasture."

"Guess I'd better put old Cap in the barn," Brock remarked, turning away. "I'll be pullin' out for Torchlight purty early in the mornin'."

After a moment's hesitation, Sam Harlow also turned away and started slowly for the ranch house. Perhaps he suspected old Brock's reason for leaving the ranch so early in the morning. The veteran puncher didn't want to be on hand when the chuck wagon, the thundering cavvy and the ten whooping riders went galloping away into the dawn.

"Got your old lariat all limbered up, Brock?" called the jovial-faced Bill Taylor, one of the older punchers.

"Grandpa ain't goin' with us, fellers!" cut in Rusty Prine. He was saddling a gray horse which, next to Brock's own buckskin, was the favorite mount in the latter's string. "The boss gently told him a little while ago that he was too old. That bull herdin' was about the right speed for him now."

"Is—is that right, Brock?" inquired Shorty Blaine, another of the old timers.

"Well—partly right, anyhow," Brock replied. "I'm not goin' on the roundup."

"Purty soft for the old folks!" young Prine jeered loudly. "Instead of makin' coyote bait outta 'em like they do outta old worn-out stove-up horses, they put 'em on a pension and—"

"Hey, you!" Big Ed Farley barged toward the speaker. "Button up that mouth of yourn—or the end of your snout's goin' to be a dang sight redder'n your hair!"

"Hold on, gents!" old Brock called to them. "Don't pay no attention to this windbag. It might look like—well—like I *was* gettin' old if I've got to have somebody else do my fightin' for me. But there's other ways than fists. I see Mr. Prine carries a gun. So do I. And there's no rheumatism in my trigger finger."

"Get outta my way, you hombres!" Prine ordered, leaping into his saddle. "The boss told me to haze these horses down to the pasture!"

Maybe it was because anger was leaping through his veins that the new puncher wheeled the high-lifed gray about on his haunches. More likely it was because he wanted to escape that cordon of stern-eyed punchers. At any rate, his quick, unexpected jerk on the reins almost reared the gray over backward. Then, cursing, the rider gouged hard with the rowels of brutal spurs while the heavy and severe Spanish bit brought red to the gray's mouth.

Brock's right arm whipped about. There was a sudden swish of loop hissing in the air—and Rusty Prine,

caught in its snare, was being jerked from his saddle to the ground.

No sooner had the "busted" rider landed with a grunt when old Brock, moving with the swiftness of a slim old gray wolf, flipped a double half-hitch over the fallen man's boots. Then, while the grinning cowpunchers nodded their mute approval, the elderly waddy removed Prine's sharp-roweled spurs and pounded them into a mass of distorted steel with a convenient sledge hammer. Next came the cruel-shanked bit from the gray's bridle. Now, as deliberately as if he were freeing a branded calf, Brock walked over and untied the fuming Prine.

The younger man leaped to his feet, going for his gun as he did so. But old Brock's .45 cleared leather first.

"Better leave that hogleg in the holster," the older man was drawling complacently to the hesitating Prine.

"Hey! What's goin' on here?" called Sam Harlow, who was hurrying from the ranch house.

"Nothin' much, Sam," Brock replied, pointing to the red-mouthed gray. "Young Rusty Prine here just decided that his spurs and bridle bit was a little too tough on horse flesh. In fact, he was goin' to pull his gun and *make* me lend him them extry spurs and bit of mine." The faintest trace of a grin flickered across his tanned face as he eyed the twitching Prine. "But shucks, Sam! He didn't have to get so plumb anxious all of a sudden. I'm willin' to accommodate him, if only for the sake of the horses in my old string."

"I see." The cattleman nodded soberly and shot a quick wink at Brock. "All right. S'pose you loan your extry bit and spurs to Rusty. I'll see that he don't get rough on his horses. And besides, it's a little too late now to find a new rider to take his place."

It wasn't yet daylight the next morning when Brock, without waiting for breakfast, saddled his buckskin horse and jogged away on his thirty-mile jaunt to Torchlight. He didn't want to be on hand when bedrolls were carried out of the bunkhouse and loaded into the wagon. Nor did he want to say goodbye to those loyal punchers, any one of whom—with the exception of Rusty Prine—would fight for him at the drop of a hat. Next season he would be far more reconciled to his lot. But at this time the ache in his valiant old heart was too keen.

It was shortly past noon when the range veteran trailed into the miniature cowtown of Torchlight. But it wasn't until after he had ridden down to the loading pens to accept delivery of the twenty head of bulls, and their registration papers from the man who had shipped them North, that Brock rode back to the livery barn, put his horse away and then walked across the street to the town's only hotel.

The hours of the warm afternoon dragged by slowly for the old puncher. He loafed about in the Gold Spur Saloon where he tried to pass the time by watching the town's regular loafers play cards. But his thoughts weren't of cards, or on the desultory conversation around the poker table. His eyelids would droop, and he would wonder if the Churndash chuck wagon had reached its first camp, Antelope Creek, where the clean-up of the lower country always began. Too, he found himself wondering what horse Rusty Prine was riding today—and *how* he was riding him.

Late in the afternoon the drowsy Brock was roused by the sound of spur rowels jingling through the doorway of the saloon. The newcomer was "Slate" Mellinger, so nicknamed because of the dull cast of his slate-colored eyes. For a brief moment this brawny, red-faced straw boss of the Wyomont outfit hesitated to let his gaze travel around the room. Then,

striding noisily up to the bar, he called:

"Drinks for the house, Jimmy!"

Chairs scraped around the poker table as the players heard this welcome news—all but Brock's. The latter remained seated, ignoring this general invitation issued by the man he had always thought guilty of killing Sam Harlow's father.

"Come on, old man Lanning!" Mellinger called brusquely. "I wouldn't slight you—even if you do hang out with that Churndash layout."

"I'm not that thirsty, Mellinger," Brock replied.

"You're not sulkin', are you, just 'cause your boss wouldn't be bothered with an old chromo like you on the roundup?"

"You must've been runnin' true to form," the older man countered. "Doin' a little spyin' around on the north side of Chain Crick."

Slate Mellinger's florid face turned redder for an instant. He bristled and replied:

"I didn't have to do no spyin' to find that out. Everybody on the whole damn range knows you're a has-been. Yeah, and if you wasn't—if you was about twenty years younger—I'd take some of that rear-up outta you."

Slowly old Brock rose from his chair. Then, his gray eyes smouldering their defiance, he drawled, "Don't let these gray hairs stop you. You didn't let 'em stop you when you, and those three coyotes that was ridin' with you, ambushed old Phil Harlow and me. You ain't paralyzed — only from your neck up. And while I don't claim to be as fast with a gun as I was once, I'll take a chance on earmarkin' that other ear of yours this time."

A hush fell over the room as the eyes of the two men clashed. But it was Slate Mellinger who, with a false ring in the laugh he had forced, turned away to the bar saying:

"Drink up, fellers! I ain't got the heart to kill that harmless old—" He ripped out a string of oaths as he reached for his whisky glass.

Before his nervous hand could reach it, however, Brock's gun roared. The glass, shattered to a flying spray, disappeared from the bar. Mellinger whirled, the color leaving his face.

"No man calls me them names, skunk!" old Brock calmly remarked. "Now, either go for your gun, or go out of town—pronto!"

Mellinger didn't hesitate this time. The trigger speed that the elderly Brock still maintained, and the latter's uncanny marksmanship, seemed to shatter the Wyomont man's nerve as the zipping bullet had shattered his whisky glass. He headed for the doorway without looking back—and then out of town.

"Whew!" Jimmy, the bartender, expelled a sigh of relief. "Gug-gosh, Brock! The next time you explode a glass all over the bar, give me a chance to duck, will you?"

"Sorry, Jimmy," the old puncher apologized. "But since Mellinger didn't finish what he started—well—I'll set up the drinks."

Early the next morning Brock started trailing the twenty head of pure-bred Herefords toward the Churndash. And although it was a tedious job, the old puncher, using one end of his lariat as a persuader, kept the broad-backed, drooping-horned animals ever plodding toward the mountains. At noon a halt was called on the bank of Chain Creek to let them drink and rest.

It was during this pause that old Brock saw something which made him wonder. The carcasses of three Churndash cows were laying on the sandbar along the June-flooded stream. The only solution he could reach was that the three critters had been victims of a caving bank while trailing along the deep, swirling waters of the silt-reddened creek which at this time of year was more like a small river.

Early that evening Brock, having swung away from Chain Creek, herded his weary animals into the grassy swale through which chortled the clear water of Bowl Springs. While they grazed, the old puncher made an "Injun" camp, preparatory for staying over night. He picketed his horse, boiled coffee in a tin can, and spread his saddle blanket on a grassy mound from whence he could command a view of the entire spot.

Frequently, however, the old man's gaze traveled off across the hills toward Antelope Creek, six miles away, where he knew the roundup must be camped. The riders would be thundering into camp about now; jerking their saddles off sweating horses; washing their own sweat-stained faces in the creek; and, while laughter prevailed, piling their battered tin plates with beefsteak and those fluffy biscuits such as only Baldy Reeves, the veteran cook, could make. Biscuits with plenty of butter and syrup.

The none too fresh cheese and crackers that Brock had bought in Torchlight seemed suddenly even more tasteless. He stopped eating, rolled a cigarette with gnarled but nimble hands, and braced his back against a rock. The purple of dusk unfurled itself across the range and still he sat there. But when, at last, the sky grew hazy-bright with stars, the old puncher rose, unbuckled his cartridge belt, took a final look at the bedded-down bulls, walked over to stroke the sleek neck of his buckskin for a moment, then started for his blanket.

"Reach for the stars—you old buzzard!"

At the sound of that sharp order, old Brock turned slowly to see the man whose voice he recognized—Slate Mellinger—coming around the big rock. Another figure was moving forward from his left; another from his right.

"So it's you, Mellinger?" the old man drawled.

"Yeah!" the other snarled, grabbing up the gun that Brock had carelessly dropped beside the dead embers of his campfire. "The same gent that you got so tough with in town yesterday. And here's where you git some of that rear-up took outta you!" Then, to one of his husky confederates: "Tie the old buzzard's paws, Brownie. Jake, you saddle up that cayuse of his."

"What's in the wind, Mellinger?" Brock demanded.

"You'll find out!" gloated the straw boss of the Wyomont Company. "We're takin' them bulls acrost Chain Crick. And we're *startin'* you and your cayuse acrost—but you ain't goin' to make it."

"Bulls or none of us'll make it, you locoed coyote!" old Brock retorted. "As high and as wide and as swift as that stream's runnin' now, it can't be done."

"Oh, can't it though?" the mocking Mellinger laughed. "Hear that, fellers? I told you that this dumb Churndash layout didn't guess what's been goin' on. Not even after findin' their dead cows strung along the crick bank! But let's git goin'. I'll lead pore old Mr. Lanning's horse while you gents round them bulls up. Come on!"

Cold anger stabbed at old Brock. He had made light of the bull herding job; had told Sam Harlow that it belonged to a ten-year-old kid. Now he had made a mess of it. Eight thousand dollars—and very likely himself—would be floating down the swollen depths of Chain Creek.

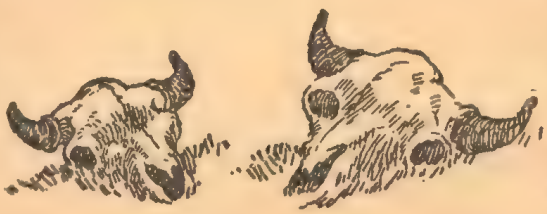
"You've got me where you want me—finally," he told Slate Mellinger. "Put a bullet through me if you want to, but don't drown them bulls."

"I don't figger to drown 'em," the other sneered. "I aim to file them horn brands out and put the Wyomont burn on their hides. Yep, and charge twenty head of first-class bulls up to the company. And, much as I'd like to put a slug through your old carcass, I can't take no chances on doin' it. Folks in town knows we had a

little set-to yesterday. They might think *I* killed you. I don't want no bullet holes in your carcass if somebody'd happen to find it washed up on a sandbar down the crick somewheres."

Brock remained silent after that, having no alternative but to allow his captor to lead along the horse on which he rode. The old puncher saw that the bulls were being driven toward Brush Bend, where Chain Creek made a curve southward, and so named because of the underbrush growing about the trunks of thick cottonwood trees. He was surprised when he found that a hidden trail had been cleared through this quarter-mile of vegetation always shunned by himself, as well as the other Churndash riders.

Brock was due for another surprise when he was brought to the spot where the trail ended at the bank of the swirling stream. In the meager illumination of starlight and new moon, he saw, anchored to a cable stretched across the creek, a good-sized raft made of cottonwood logs. It was then that the significance of Mellinger's former remark dawned on him. He knew now the reason for those dead cows down the stream. Their big calves had been ferried across to the Wyomont range, and the mothers deliberately drowned to prevent their drawing the attention of Churndash riders by bawling up and down the creek bank.



Obviously, old Brock's lot was to be that of the drowned cows, for Slate Mellinger, after calling across the noisy stream to the figure of a man on the opposite bank, ordered:

"All right, fellers. Load this old chromo on the—"

Hoofbeats interrupted these orders. And old Brock, turning to look with the others, saw Rusty Prine riding up.

"What the hell you doin' here?" Mellinger demanded.

"Aw, old Harlow fired me," the younger man said. "He told me to go back to the ranch and send that old buzzard out!" He pointed to Brock. "Them knot-headed punchers of his give me a hot chappin', too. But I'll git even with 'em. That old coyote yanked me off'n a horse the other night and—"

"So that's the longest you could hold a job, was it?" Mellinger cut in. "You're a lotta help, you are! You git in a spot where you can do me some good and then git fired!"

"You're gittin' these bulls, ain't you?" Prine countered. "If I hadn't tipped you off that they was bein' shipped in, you wouldn't knowed—"

"We'll talk that over later!" the disgusted Mellinger growled. "Hey, you, Jake and Brownie! Git on the boat there so's you can help me shove this old buzzard off into midstream!"

Brock didn't protest as his buckskin was led from the flat rock on to the log structure. He was bound too helplessly to fight. Yet, in the face of what looked like certain doom, there came a ray of satisfaction. Sam Harlow wanted him out there on the roundup.

"South!" Mellinger yelled to the man across the creek.

Brock saw the heavy cable swing down stream on the opposite bank, then tighten as it was drawn about another tree so that the current of the swift-running water would whip it, ferry boat fashion, toward the south bank.

"Take them ropes off him!" Mellinger rasped. "We don't want nobody to find them tied to his carcass!" When this was done, the straw boss commanded, "All right. Shove that cayuse into the water!"

Brock felt the muscles of the reluctant buckskin quiver as he cringed

on the edge of the heavy raft. Then, with a loud snort, the horse leaped clear of the logs and splashed into the cold, swirling current.

"Swim, Cap pony!" he gasped, fighting hard to balance the game little horse against the treacherous current. "It's a long shot, yet—"

But the low-swimming horse seemed also to realize that this was a battle against death. Valiantly, wisely, he maneuvered himself during that hectic struggle between the foreboding banks of The Narrows. Now horse and rider were sweeping around the next bend. Brock caught a glimpse of a whirling tree near him—too late to dodge the dead limb that came whipping over at him. There was a jar across his neck and the back of his head. His senses reeled. The hissing noise of the water seemed to be roaring louder. But he clung desperately to the saddle horn with a numb hand. . . .

It was a terrific vibration that jolted old Brock back to full consciousness. Cap, the dripping buckskin, was shaking the water from his drenched hide, and with a motion that makes stirrup leathers fairly pop. The rider gazed stupidly about and saw that he was safely landed on the south side of Chain Creek.

The man who operated the cable on the south bank of Chain Creek was preparing to shift his cable to the lower tree. On the opposite bank the last two bulls and four riders were aboard the raft, and Slate Mellinger's voice had just boomed, "South!" Before the cable was free of the upper tree, however, a heavy club, gripped in old Brock Lanning's bony hand, swished through the shadows. The cable operator crumpled with a groan drowned in the noise of the nearby current. Then Brock took the fallen man's gun, shoved it into his hip pocket and grabbed the cable.

"All set, Pete?" came Mellinger's call.

"All set!" Brock yelled.

But the old puncher didn't fasten the cable to the big tree downstream. He simply slackened it around a cottonwood directly opposite the one on the other bank, careful to stay in the shadows as he did so. Now the awkward craft headed for midstream. There it stopped, anchored motionlessly when the sliding guy cable reached the point where the slack main cable swerved back to the tree behind which Brock was concealed.

"What the hell's the matter?" Slate Mellinger roared.

"You're right where I want you—that's what's the matter!" the grinning Brock yelled. "Throw all your guns over here on the bank, and maybe I'll change my mind about cuttin' this end of the cable plumb loose!"

"No!" croaked four voices in unison. "Here's our guns!"

Then, while voices begged from midstream, Brock built a large fire on the south bank, a blaze that could be seen for miles. Yet, much sooner than he expected, Sam Harlow and three Churndash punchers appeared on the opposite bank, four men who stared open-mouthed at what they saw.

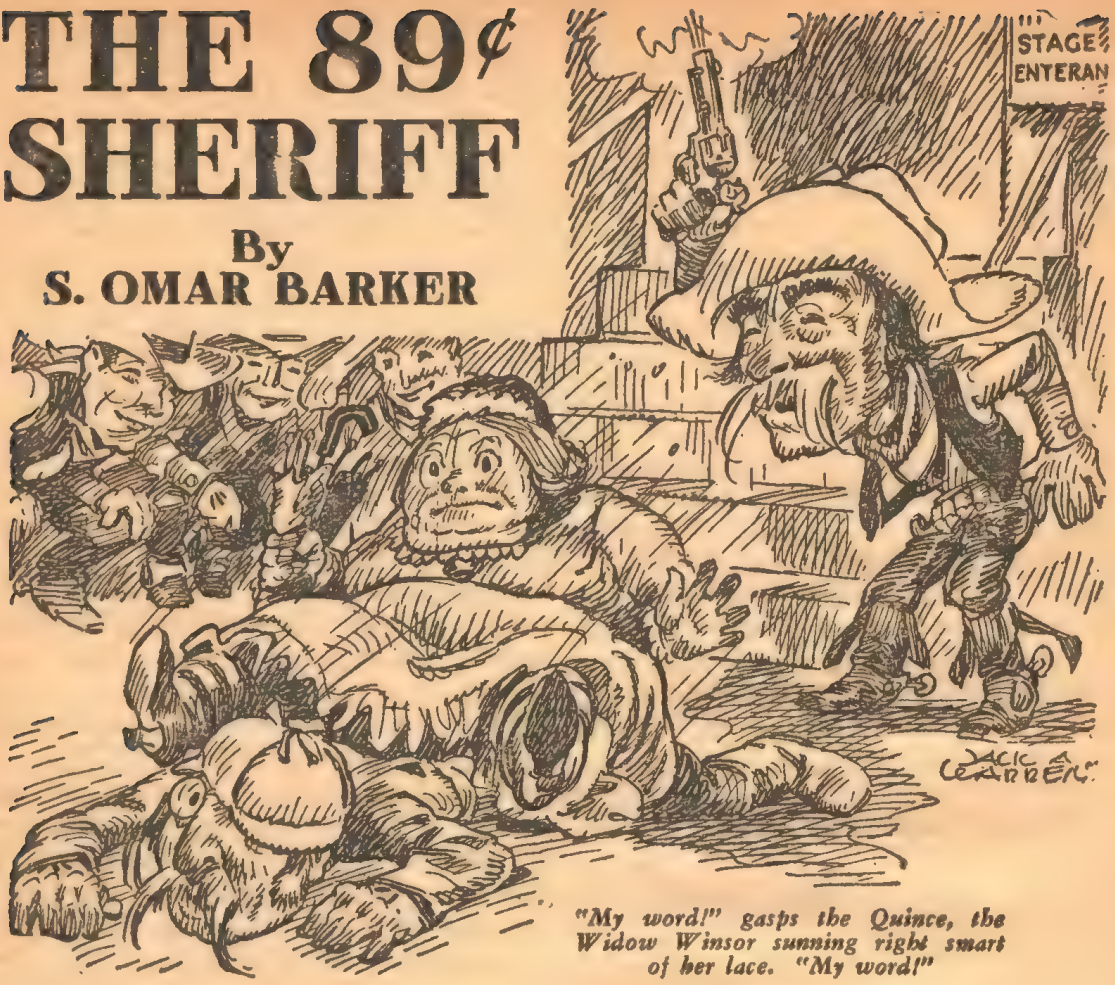
"We was trailin' this Rusty Prine," Sam Harlow said, when the five prisoners had been bound, and when old Brock's explanations were over. "He left camp with Shorty's new Navajo saddle blanket, Big Ed's silver-mounted spurs and my new pearl-handled gun." He chuckled as he went on. "Well, I guess we was both wrong, Brock. That bull herdin' job was for a man—a real man—after all. And it's a cinch that anybody that can take what you took tonight, and then top it off by ketchin' five skunks at one trappin', can stand to ride on a lot more roundups!"

"Don't worry about that old buzzard!" rasped the helpless Mellinger. "He ain't gittin' older. He's gittin' tougher!"

"For once," said Sam Harlow, winking at the grinning old Brock, "Slate Mellinger's tellin' the truth."

THE 89¢ SHERIFF

By
S. OMAR BARKER



"My word!" gasps the Quince, the Widow Winsor sunning right smart of her lace. "My word!"

His Jolly Old Marksmanship Wins The Quince Of Ales A Spot Of Sheriffing.

Jest so nobody don't get his rope jangled about it, I want it set down from the jump-off that the hero of this here pageant of passion an' politics is ol' Baldy MacInness.

It come about, like a heap of other cow country conniptions, from a bottle an' a bullet.

Mister Charles Wellington-Winterbottom, better knowed amongst us cowboys that hoes his turnips as the Quince of Ales, account of certain quaint corkscrew customs he's got, heaved the bottle. It come sailin' out the open east window of the Flyin' Bottle Rawnch House, plumb agile an' empty, a gleamin' token of the happy home life transpirin' within, glistenin' in the sun like polished glass—which it was. Otherwise it wouldn't never have shattered like it done when the bullet hit it.

At the same moment, Destiny, drawed by a pair of bay trottin' mules, turned in at the gate. This here Trio of Fate, not countin' the mules, consists of Mister Bullhide Toomey, Señor Yooly (short of Eulogio) Pacheco, an' a lady of loghouse dimensions by the name of the Widow of ol' John Winsor. What the wagon boss, tophand an' *cocinero* is to a roundup, so is these three to the so-called Democratic Party in Tecolote County, New Mexico. They're connivin' cannoodlers from who skun the skunk. Wherever they show up, politics begins to smoke like a wet wood fire.

Right now, frum where I'm disgracin' the cowboy callin' hoein' turnips, I can see their mouths drop open till their chins drag their briskits. They've saw that bottle come eaglin' out the window, they've heard the *pow* of a six-gun, they've observed that flyin' bottle demobilized plumb in mid-flight, an' now they take notice of the Quince of Ales his own self, standin' at the open window with a glass of tonsil lotion in one hand an' a six-gun in the other.

To a man up a tree it looks like he has jest casually done a piece of crack shootin' that you don't find in the catalogues. Actually he's jest been cleanin' his .45 an' stepped to the window to see what the shootin's about. Ol' Baldy MacInness, likewise fondlin' a go-bang, is hid in the gooseberry bushes off a piece to one side of the window.

Ol' Baldy is supposed to be curlin' hoss tails out at the stables, but Larry Pinell has bet him one of them Scotch wagers of 89c. even, that he can't plug one of them bottles the Quince is all the time heavin' out that window, on the fly. Baldy has been ambushed in them bushes most of the time, now, for a week. Plenty of bottles has winged their way out, but this is ol' Baldy's first shot. He's too stingy to use a cartridge unless he knows it ain't a miss.

Now it's a rule on the Flying Bottle to welcome all arrivals, formal and polite, like white folks. So I throw my hoe into the hoss pasture an' come crawlin' outa the turnip patch to do the honors. As I come up unnoticed behind 'em, I hear ol' Bullhide Toomey givin' forth to his committee as follows:

"The way this here Quince can shoot, I got a hunch that we better run him for sheriff instid of probate judge!"

"But what about me?" protests the Widow Winsor. "I thought—"

"Esscuse, please," puts in this here Señor Yooly Pacheco with one of them *chili* shrugs, "in thees country nobody Democrat ever ween, anyhow. You theenk?"

They don't have time to answer, because there I am, givin' 'em the official *como-le-va* to the Flyin' Bottle.

"Light, folks," I says, "an' rest your tail-bo—I beg pardon, ma'am—won't you kindly git down an' come in?"

"What ho, Watson!" hollers the Quince from the window. "Usher them in, my man. I mean to say, *pronto*, while I hasten to pour a spot of the old libation, what!"

So, havin' put in thirty years usherin' cows hither an' yonder under my proper name of Hoss-Tail Pete Perry, I now perceed to herd in this committee, chafin' some under the damfool Watson moniker the Quince gives me, but still able to set up an' look a whiskey bottle in the face.

The Quince has the internal sunburn lotion all poured by the time I herd 'em in, includin' one for me. He squinches that glass eye he calls his monicle into one eye an' gives 'em the once over as I interduce them. He strains his belly band to bend low over the Widow Winsor's pudgy hand. There's a trick to it, though. It's his own thumb he actually kisses.

"I say, y'know," he warbles. "Chawmed, what! Watson, my man, serve the gentlemen!"

He serves the widow his own self. She takes the glass, sniffs it like an ol' cow sniffin' spring water with a dead horse in it, an' sets it down. But Bullhide Toomey an' ol' Yooly, they step right up waggin' their tails.

Bullhide waves his glass towards the Quince.

"To the next sheriff of Tecolote County!" he booms. "Our peerless feller Democrat, Dead-Shot Charley Winterbottom!"

"Haw!" says the Quince, lookin' as puzzled as a locoed steer at a waterhole. "You're havin' me on, what!"

"Sure," grins ol' Bullhide, "on the Demo ticket for sheriff, Mister Binterwottom."

"Esscuse, please," puts in ol' Yooly, who don't want no misunderstandin'. "Señor Toomey means thees committee like that you run for shereef, but of course it all depend if the convention next week approve the nomination."

"Certainly," adds the Widow Winsor, kinder stiffish. "We are only the committee, Mister Witterbuntom. No doubt there will also be other candidates for the nomination. I myself, in fact, urged by my friends, have decided—"

"Mrs. Winsor," Bullhide jumps in, givin' her the hard eye, "will like as not be runnin' for probate judge. But for the sheriff! When we cirkilate the news about that shot we jest see you make, Mr. Binterwottom, the convention will nominate you, unanimous. Especially, my boy"—he starts to drop a hearty hand on the Quince's shoulder, but the Quince sidesteps it—"especially after the speech you will make from the convention platform. Dead-Shot Charley! You'll wow 'em, my boy!"

"Wow 'em?" says the Quince. "Oh, come now! Tiddledewinks, an' all that rot, Mister Toomey! That remarkable shot to which you refer—I fear you labor under a misapprehension. Indeed, it was not—"

"Course it wasn't," whinnies ol' Baldy MacInness, bobbin' his homely mug up at the window. "I'll tell ye all about that shot. 'Twas—"

Before he can finish dumpin' the beans, I step over to that window my own self.

"Shut up!" I growls, so nobody but Baldy gets it. "Cain't you see they're offerin' the Flyin' Bottle the honor of runnin' our boss fer sheriff on the strength of that shot? It was *his shot*, see, or your name's mud! Now git on about your business."

"P s s t, Hoss-Tail," whispers ol' Baldy, "interjuce me to the lady, an' I won't make mention of that shot no further. Ain't she a rosebud!"

Fact is, the Widow Winsor is built more like a sack of horse feed than a rosebud, but she's a buxom, middle aged widow, an' all such is rosebuds to Baldy.

So the up-shoot is that Baldy don't spill the beans, an' after a tolerable session of hemmin' an' hawin', the Quince gives his consent to offer as a candidate for the Demo nomination fer sheriff, an' to make the main openin' speech at the county convention the next week.

The cold facts is that the Democrat ticket in Tecolote County ain't never got to first base in the past, an' the nomination fer sheriff has gone a-beggin'. Bullhide Toomey gives me the lowdown. He says the Widow Winsor has got bit with the ambition to become the first lady sheriff in New Mexico, an' claims if she's nominated, she can make a dicker with some sore-backed Republicans that'll put her over. But the Demo party, Bullhide says, wouldn't never survive the hurrawin' they'd git for runnin' a woman for sheriff. So him an' Yooly has hit on the idee of runnin' the Quince—mostly to sidetrack the widow. An' how big a bite do I reckon he can safely put on the Quince for a campaign contribution when the time comes?

"We'll talk about that," I says, "if an' when you git him nominated. In the meantime, you better run this widow woman off in a bog some place an' tamp her down. If the Quince finds out he's buckin' a lady, he'll duck his tail, shore. He's that kind of a gent."

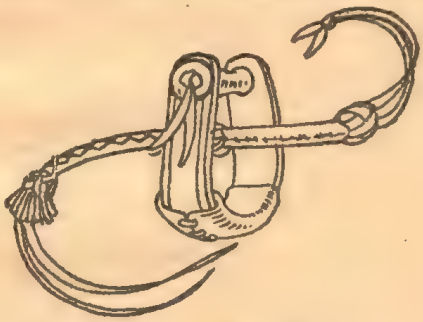
"We'll see," says Bullhide, "what can be did."

That evenin' in the bunkhouse I tell the boys what's took place. They're all there but ol' Baldy. He's done saddled an' took out on the trail of the Widow Winsor. But before he goes he makes it plenty plain, in words of one, two, three an' even four syllables, that he's aginst the Quince runnin' fer sheriff.

First place, givin' the Quince credit

for that bottle-shot has lost Baldy his 89c. bet. Second place, he's been took mighty sudden with romance about the Widow Winsor. Third place, any cash money the Quince puts out for politics is li'ble to be jest that much less for them extry bonuses that he's always passin' out to his waddies. Fourth place, I've done told Baldy what I expect ever' Flyin' Bottle hand to do: throw half a month's wages in the pot to buy votes (over the bar) for the Quince if he gits nominated. Fifth place, Baldy is a Republican, an' to make it an even half dozen, it's jest his Scotch nature to be agin things, anyhow. He claims it's for the Quince's own sake that he's buckin' it.

But the rest of the boys is for the nomination, tail with the hide. More than ever when the Quince sends for us to all step up to the house to down a spot of the ol' wildcat milk in honor of the occasion.



The Quince of Ales has recently become a citizen of the Stars and Stripes Forever. But this is his first circle into politics. He still thinks that bein' invited to "stand for office," as he puts it, even on the Demo ticket in Tecolote County, is a solemn honor.

"But look here, Quince," worries ol' Gramp Simes, "supposin' you do git on the ticket—you shorely ain't expectin' to be elected?"

"Quite," smiles the Quince, expertly sailing the bottle he's jest emptied in our behalf out the window. "Quite, Simes—in a jolly old pig's optic, what! But after all, y'know: 'What's to the race but the runnin' '—an' all that rot?"

So he says he desires our counsel in the composition of the oration he is to deliver at the convention next week. An' Ed Patterson says if he means helpin' him fix up a speech, O. K. Ed's got a almanac down at the bunkhouse with some good jokes in it.

"Maybe you can work in that 'un about the milk cows eatin' wild onions until the calves' tails growed out bushy like a skunk's from the flavor in the milk," suggests Larry Pinell. "You could lay that onto the present administration in the county."

"Pippo, what!" approves the Quince, though you can see that he don't get it. "But I shall jolly well have to compose my oration in writing, what, so that I can read it. I cawn't speak *ex tempore,* y'know."

"Never mind them foreign languages," ol' Gramp Simes points out. "Even us Democrats—most of us savvies English."

"Haw!" says the Quince.

An' then we git busy on the speech. The way we finally finish it, it starts out:

"Ladies and Gentlemen, feller citizens—I may even say feller Democrats: This is indeed an honor! Unaccustomed as I am to speaking in public—" An' so forth right on down the line: law an' order, quick justice to cow thieves an' other deservin' Republicans, an' so on, an' so on. It's a wonderful speech—if I did furnish considerable of it myself.

Comes the day of the convention. The hordes of Democracy is all gathered in Yooly Pacheco's *baile* hall in Copper City. The stage is all set. I've even managed to flavor the speaker's water pitcher with a shot of the Quince's own 100 proof.

"This water's stale!" sniffs the Widow. "I'll get a fresh pitcher!"

But even at that, the prospect looks good. The hall is crowded. Even quite a few of the opposition party has come—to hear the Quince orate. The front rows is packed with cowhands from all the ranches roundabout, an' amongst 'em, of course, all the Flyin' Bottle boys—except Baldy

MacInness. They're mostly in a purty good humor, too, the Quince havin' stood the drinks over at Ginger Ryan's to quite a few jest a while ago. At that session, ol' Baldy was present. Count on him not to miss nothin' that's drinkable—an' free.

I git hold of Bullhide Toomey an' ol' Yooly before the speakin' is to start.

"How's it look?" I asks.

"Fair," says Bullhide. "But this speech of your boss's had better be good. Good enough, in fact, to win over quite a wad of delegates that Mrs. Winsor has done got sewed up to vote for her. That gal's aimin' to be the first lady candidate for sheriff in this here county, or know the reason why."

"Those is right," shrugs Yooly. "Either thees Meez Weensor got to turn her support to the Queence, or else he got to make beeg stampede weeth the speech, or eet joost be too bad! What you theenk—maybe he take nomination for probate judge instead of shereef, eh?"

"Nossir," I says, "it's sheriff or nothin'! An' don't you worry about his speech. It'll wow 'em!"

"It'd better," grunts Bullhide, an' goes up on the platform to open the meetin'.

I sneak up jest off stage where I can watch the perceedin's an' kinder prompt the Quince if he gits his spurs tangled. He's settin' up there on the platform, with Yooly on one side of him, the Widow Winsor an' some more big-wigs, on the other, and he's lookin' as pink an' rosy as a baby that's jest been scrubbed with borax. I've had Larry Pinell swipe his monicle, as bein' too danged effete fer sech a gatherin', an' I reckon he kinder misses it. He keeps sorter lickin' his lips like he was nervous—an' maybe a little dry.

Bullhide Toomey makes him a top-hand interduction, an' the big moment has come. The Quince gits up an' bows to the applause till you'd think his belly band would snap. Then he steps up to the speaker's table, kinder gulps an' pours hisself a glass of water.

Bein' a gentleman drinker by habit, he kinder waves the glass towards the crowd.

"Pippo, my lads!" he smiles, an' starts to down it.

One swallow an' he gits a look on his face like a kitten that has accidentally lapped up some coal oil. I reckon he ain't seen the Widow Winsor refill that pitcher.

But he gulps it down an' reaches to his hip pocket for the paper his speech is wrote on.

An' it ain't there!

You can see it's a shock, but these British boys, they got a reputation for muddlin' through. The Quince recovers his jaw off'n his briskit an' faces the audience.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he commences, an' balks.

He licks his lips, pours hisself another glass of water, downs it like it was medicine, an' r'ars back for a new start. But the strange experience of drinkin' water kinder addles his tongue.

"Ladies and y'know, gentlemen," he quavers. "Jolly ol' cello fitizens, what!"

An' he balks agin. He wipes the pusspiration from his noble brow, swigs down another glass of water, an' hooks in his spurs once more.

"Fellow citizens! I may even say, y'know, fellow what-yuh-ma-call-its, what!"

Now I'd advised the Quince to talk from 'way down in his throat, an' although he seems to have kinder forgot his speech, he has remembered that advice. What little he does say sounds like it's boomin' up from the bottom of a well.

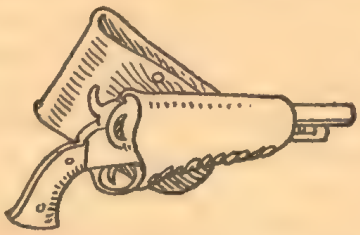
"Hey, Gramp," stage-whispers some ol' rollicky cowboy down in the front row, "we must of been havin' a lot o' rain. Hark to the bullfrogs!"

A lot of folks laugh, an' the Widow Winsor smirks an' snickers.

As for the Quince, he pours him another glass of water.

"Hey, Ed," calls out a yahoo from the Cross T, to ol' Ed Patterson, "whyn't you boys take him down to the branch an' water him before you run him in?"

Well, it's a big water pitcher, an' it's still half full at this point, so the Quince pours hisself another. He waves the glass kinder weakly in the direction of the Widow Winsor.



"Pippo, madam!" he croaks.

Then he kinder braces up an' steps out in front of the table.

"I say, y'know," he begins agin. "Ladies and I may even say—er—gentlemen, what! This is, y'know, a jolly old honor."

An' he balks agin.

Well, I know his speech by heart, an' I now see that it's time to kinder prompt him if he's ever goin' to git it made.

"Unaccustomed as I am," I stage whisper.

"Unaccustomed as I am," croaks the Quince.

"To drinkin' water!" bellers out that Cross T yahoo.

"Law an' order, an' all that rot, y'know," stammers the Quince, an' reaches for the water pitcher agin.

By now all them cowhands down front is gittin' funny idees, an' as the Quince don't seem to be of a mind to do nothin' but stand up there an' drench hisself, they make free to speak right out.

"Pippo, what!" says one of 'em.

Then this Cross T yahoo r'ars up an' toes the taw line.

"Mister Chairman," he shouts, "I make a motion that this here speech be considered made! An' furthermore—"

That's all the further he gits.

There's two back doors marked "exit" leadin' off that platform to the alley, one at each end of it, with right high, steep steps outside leadin' down to the ground.

Right now one of 'em bangs open an' an hombre with a flour sack pulled over his head for a mask, steps in.

"Yeow!" he yells. "Missus Winsor fer sheriff!"

He totes a gun in each hand, both pointin' smack towards the Quince's feet, an' both talkin'.

"Yippee!" this here intruder yells, in a disguised False Etta voice that don't even sound human, much less familiar. "Yippee! Lookit yer ol' candidate shakin' in his boots! Yeow!"

Well, us boys has all left our hawg-legs off fer this meetin', jest outa pure ettiket, or we'd shore of opened up on this here wahoo an' drilled him. Fer a half second it looks like a bloody ol' slaughter, with our Quince of Ales the slaughteree. Then I sees somethin' in the air that relieves me quite much. It's little bitty pieces of paper waddin'. Them shots is all jest blanks.

But to give the Quince of Ales due credit, I don't figger he even notices that. At the moment this here yowlin' curly wolf steps in an' commences shootin', the Quince has got the water pitcher in his hand, fixin' to drench his tonsils agin. But instid of droppin' it an' stampedin' fer that other door like you might think, he jest calmly draws back an' hurls it plumb true an' hard into this hombre's middle.

"Pippo, what!" he says, very calm an' collected, at the same time givin' the Widow Winsor a gentle urge to flee out that other door, an' grabbin' ol' Bullhide an' Yooly to hold 'em back from tromplin' her as she stampedes out to safety. "Women and children first, what!" he says, an' follers that flung pitcher with the glass of water he'd jest poured.

Doubtless on account of the practice he has had pitchin' bottles out the window, both throws is bull's eyes, an' they stagger this masked

hombre right smart. Not so much, though, but what he can jump for the door an' take out like the heel flies had him.

The Quince makes a long dive at him acrost a pile of empty benches that's stacked up between 'em, an' me right behind him, with Larry an' Gramp an' Jonk an' Ed Patterson clawin' their way to the platform to back us up. But this feller is done gone from there, an' the door slammed in our faces. By the time the Quince an' me busts on outside the alley is empty. There ain't nobody in sight but a woman is yellin' bloody murder from around at them other exit stairs. There's kinder of a bumpety-bump noise with it, too.

The Quince beats me gettin' there by about two jumps an' a jig step.

There on the top steps is the Widow Winsor, with ol' Bullhide an' Yooly jest heavin' her up off of them parts that woman used to wear bustles on. She's squallin' to beat a hawg caught under the fence. An' jest as they're gettin' her tailed up to her feet agin, ol' Bullhide steps down a step, his feet shoots out from under him an' down them stairs he comes, bampety-bampety-bang. Ol' Yooly also starts to skid, lets go of the Widow, she steps down a step her own self, an' here she comes, too, bumpety-bumpety-bung, down that steep little stairway, sunnin' her petticoats.

There ain't no tellin' how big a hole she'd of knocked in the earth if the Quince hadn't been the kind of a feller that can act faster than he can recollect a speech. As it was, by the time she hit the third step from the bottom, the Quince is right on hand, an' the wind-up is one of these here tabloos you hear about: Quince of Ales, as hero, savin' the dumplin' damsel by the simple method of gittin' in her way an' actin' as a cushion for her fall. There he sets, jest off the bottom step, with the Widow Winsor (still sunnin' right smart of her lace trimmin's) smack in his lap.

"My word!" says the Quince.

Yeah, somebody had doctored them steps, expectin' the Quince of Ales to stampede out that way when them blanks begun to boom, no doubt figgerin' that not even them Democrats would nominate a man fer sheriff that spooked an' got hisself hurrawed to death fer tumblin' down stairs besides.

Well, we finally tailed the widow up off the Quince, marched back inside an' kinder calmed down the meetin'.

"Esscuse, please," speaks up ol' Yooly, "the Meez Winsor, I theenk she like for say a few words now."

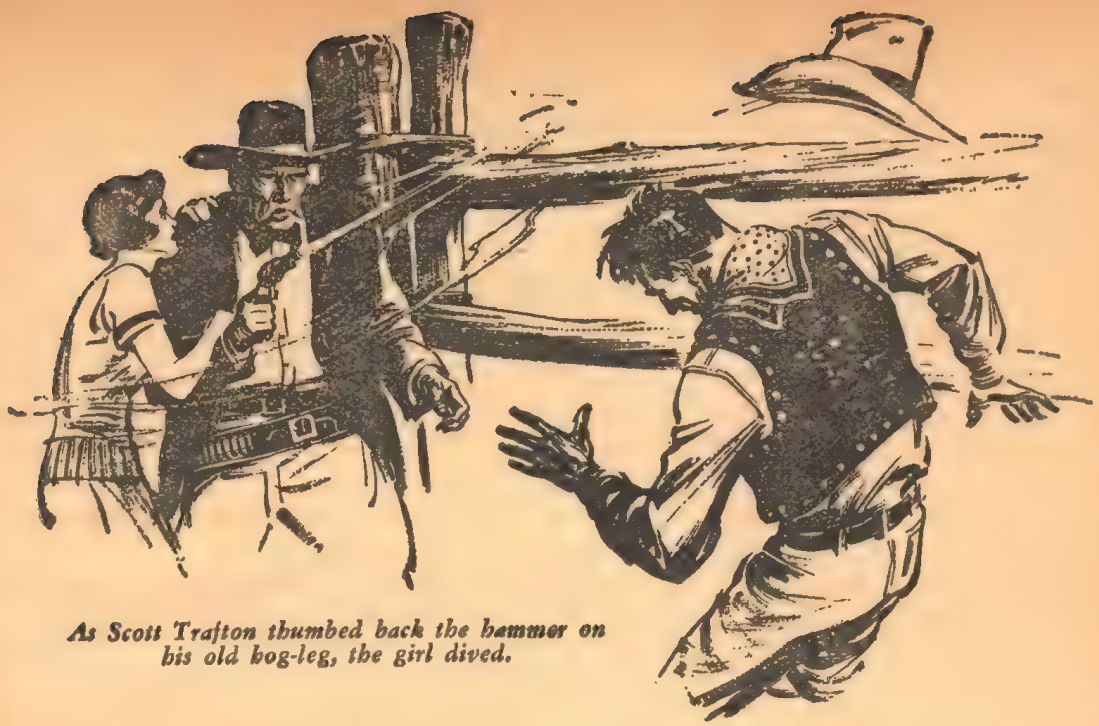
The widow stands up. Her pins are shaky, but her voice ain't.

"Fellow Democrats," she orates. "What do we care for speeches? Actions is what counts! I hereby place the name of a fearless, peerless gentleman in nomination for the place of sheriff on our ticket, in recognition of his bravery at this moment of crisis. Further, I withdraw my own candidacy in his favor, and move that we make it unanimous! Fellow Democrats—I interduce to you the next Sheriff of Tecolote County, the Honorable Mister Charles Wellington-Winterbottom, esquire!"

So he gits the nomination.

I see ol' Baldy MacInness later that evenin'. He'd backed the widow to win, an' now he's been mournfully payin' off a lot of 89c. bets. He looks about as joyful as an orphan *borrego.*

Uh-huh, it was ol' Baldy that swiped the Quince's speech out of his pocket over at Ginger Ryan's. It was him, also, that come bustin' in, shootin' off them blanks to spook the Quince into stampedin' out that other door an' bustin' hisself on them doctored steps. He'd poured a sack of them hard little marble-sized black walnuts on 'em. Mighty uncertain footin' fer anybody leavin' in a hurry. An' maybe I already tell you ol' Baldy is Scotch? What I ketch him doin' about dusk that evenin'—I ketch him out there in the alley pickin' up them walnuts. You see, they'd cost him 69c.!



As Scott Trafton thumbed back the hammer on his old hog-leg, the girl dived.

THE CALABOOSE KID

By ROBERT DONALDSON

When The Waddy Skinned He Who Got Caught In His Own Trap He Found The Mark Of An Outlaw Under His Hide.

Molly Gaines backed to the far corner of the porch where the thick honeysuckle vine hid her blushes. Blue eyes misted, she faltered, "Yes . . . Neil, yes," and her reserve gave away like the breaking up of a hard winter. Sobbing deep in her throat, both her arms reached hungrily for the slender, brown-eyed cowboy.

Molly didn't have to reach far, for Neil met her greedily. They clung together, trying to show each other what neither could put into words. The deep, shadowy porch was suddenly all cluttered up with pretty colored birds singing sweet songs. Neil buried his face in Molly's honey-colored hair, and looking up, saw their future through a gold-inlaid haze.

He saw a lot of things. Beginning with a whole lapful of trouble, which now stood glowering at them, one foot on the top step. Scott Trafton, Molly's guardian, was too beat out for words and just stood and looked. But Neil knew something would have to give. Otherwise, swelling up like he was, Scott'd bust out his clawhammer coat. But maybe if the old rooster only loosened that black string-tie of his, he could breathe easier.

Neil braced himself. The pot-bellied old rascal had warned him away from Molly a couple of times. Neil

felt his face getting red, for ol' Scott looked madder than a round-up cook in a rain storm. So Neil told him, "That's all right, Mister Trafton. Molly'n' me's goin' to get married."

"Yuh're jus' as crazy as yuh look, Neil Snyder," the little old man snorted. "Yuh think I'm a-goin' to let my ward marry a cigarette suckin', whisky drinkin', high-heeled, cow punchin' son of a . . . I beg yuhr pa'don, Molly, but yuh git the hell on into the house!"

Molly moved away a little, brushing down her checked gingham dress, as Neil said, "Don't git all riled up, Mister Trafton. I rode in town this evenin' so's I could talk business with yuh, first thing in the mornin' when the bank opened."

"Yuh ain' got no business, yuh danged saddle-bum!" the old man yapped. "Yuhr note's due, an' yuh're a-goin' to pay it. An' if yuh *don'* yuh an' that derned ol' bresh-poppin' partner a yuhrn, Rowdy Elliott, are goin' to be ridin' off cross country talkin' to yuhrse'ves!"

Neil tried to keep his temper, but he sure wished someone would blindfold old Scott, or sit on his head. The Rafter-7 outfit couldn't meet their note. They'd had blackleg last fall, then some nester burnin' soap weeds had destroyed part of the range, and on top of heavy winter losses, they'd had a light calf crop. Neil and Rowdy hadn't even thought about meetin' their note. They'd figured on borrowin' more money, an' speculatin' in old Mexico cows.

But this wasn't any time to talk business. To the girl Neil said, "Be seein' yuh, Honey." To the banker he added, "Looky here, Scott. Yuh know Rowdy'n' me's got to borrow money to get enough cows to eat our grass."

He stopped quickly, for that hit Scott bad. He choked, and gagged as he pawed the air. When he did get hold of himself, he'd figured out nineteen different reasons why *he* wasn't going to lend the Rafter-7 any more money. "Why, confound yuh, Neil Snyder, yuh must think I'm crazy!" the old man panted. "Think I'm a-goin' to lend yuh money when yuh go girlin' all over hell from Santa Rita to K.C.? Huh! Me lend money to yuh an' Rowdy Elliott? Why when I firs' knew that bowlegged rooster, he was in Santa Fe. . . ."

"I know all about that, Mister Trafton," Neil interupted. "Yuh was in the same cell with him. Only Rowdy was sent up for shootin' a skunk, an' yuh hadn't figured out no good explanation why a lot of X.I.T. calves came into this world with yuhr brand for a birthmark!"

"Hush yuhr mouths, you idiots," Molly interrupted, stepping between the pair. Of Neil she demanded, "Aren't you ashamed of yourself, heckling an old man?"

To her guardian she announced: "Daddy Scott, you just calm yourself down now. I'm going to marry Neil an' you are going to lend him and Rowdy money in the morning. What if you and Rowdy were wild when you were young? Times have changed."

"Blamed well right times is changed, Molly," the banker yelped. And pointing to a slick black team hitched to a buggy with red wheels, that was turning into the yard, continued, "There's one of the men who's changin' things. Look at him! Makin' money han' over fist. *That's* the kin' of a man yuh oughter marry, Molly."

Before he could snub his tongue, Neil had snapped, "Over my dead body." He stopped as old Scott went for his gun, yelling, "All right, Neil! Right over yuhr dead body."

Neil had to stand and take it. He'd left his gun down at the feed-corral with his saddle and chaps. He didn't even have a penknife. But he had Molly and as Scott Trafton thumbed back the hammer on his old hog-laig, the girl dived. She hit the banker's arm. There was a roar, Molly

screamed, and Neil's new fawn-colored Stetson sailed off his head.

Neil ran a nervous hand through his brown curls and picked up his hat. Old Scott's slug had torn right through the high Texas peak of the crown. As he straightened up, Neil saw nine different kinds of red. But he quieted down as Molly came to him, and putting her hands on his arm, said: "You go on home, Neil. I'll make Daddy Scott ride out to the Rafter-7 after dinner an' make peace with you and Rowdy."

Neil was burned up over the unreasonable way Scott had carried on, and he grunted. "Danged right he'll make peace with us, Molly. If he don' Rowdy 'n' me'll come in an' pull that bank right down around his ears." Then getting hold of his temper, he squeezed Molly's arm, jammed his ruined hat on his head, turned and started toward the street.

He took two steps before a snicker leaked through the fog in his head. Looking up he saw the driver of the buggy leaning back in the seat enjoying things. The boy was all hitched up in a new suit of mail-order clothes and a red tie. Two more steps and Neil was by the rig. He snapped, "Yuh better out yuhr mind on somethin' serious, Ira Kluger, 'er I'll reach up an' pull that silly grin down so'z yuh can wear it for a necktie!"

"I don't want no trouble with yuh before Miss Molly," the taller, dark complexioned boy said hurriedly.

"Dang right yuh don'," Neil agreed hastily. "Mess with *me*, yuh big, ugly cow-juicer, an' I'll turn yuhr team loose an' drive yuh down the main street hitched to yuhr own buggy. Now git!"

Obediently, gawky, raw-boned Ira swung his team around and driving out the gate, spun off toward town. Neil followed, so mad at everything his fists were itching for something to hit. He was that mad he didn't even notice he was scuffing all the new off his Flandos boots. Down the planked sidewalk of the main street in Hayden, he stalked. As he turned the corner toward the feed-yard, Moe Herstein came out of his store to say, "Vell, vell, vell, Neil. Dose dozen blue silk shirts I ordered for you came in mit dose two pair of cream-colored riding pants yuh wanted."

Neil glowered at the fat little merchant and grunted, "Yuh'd better wear 'em, Moe," as he hurried on.

Down at Logan's feed-yard, Neil buckled on his gun and kicked on his chaps and spurs. He slapped his Shipley tree on, and pinned it down so tight, Doughbelly grunted and arched his back. Neil caught the hackamore reins. "I just hope yuh feel like pitchin', yuh ol' bay devil," he muttered, and stabbed his spur into the horse's right shoulder as he got on board. But Doughbelly figured he'd better save his poor spells for some other day, and lined out through the corral gate in a high run.

He rode along a couple of miles before his mind cleared and he snickered. Old Scott sure had been on the prod. Still and all, Neil couldn't blame him too much. Molly's guardian had sent her back East to college where she'd learned Latin and some trick sort of arithmetic — trig . . . trig . . . triganometry. 'Course a gal couldn't use much Latin on a ranch. But if the Rafter-7 didn't have a better calf crop next year, they'd need some sort of arithmetic to figure out any profits.

As the horse-trail Neil was following paused on the rim-rock before dipping down along the steep side of Peacock Canyon, he stopped Doughbelly, squirmed around and looked at things. Behind him, the little town of Hayden lay out on the flats and beyond that was the long purple smudge of the Sierra Madres down in old Mexico. Neil took a long

breath. Things were going to be all right. Molly was going to marry him, and there was plenty of grass for next winter.

Just as Neil was about to decide that it was a grand world after all, he saw a dust-twister off to the south. Ahead of the dust-twister he made out two black spots and faintly caught the flash of red wheels, and got a taste in his mouth like he'd chewed up a mess of quinine. Ira Kluger was creating that twister as he drove home.

Neil thumbed his nose at the low, spread-out bunch of barns toward which Ira was heading, and neck-reined Doughbelly down the trail. Ira and his teat-jerking dairy ranch were out of sight, but Ira was right smack in the middle of Neil's mind. This Ira had drifted into the country a few years back, afoot. He'd gone crazy and put out two sections of wheat *just* like he'd known it was going to be a wet winter and two dollar wheat. Not satisfied, he and Scott Trafton'd started a dairy and were raking in money with both hands. Ira had been spreading out like loco in a wet year. He'd been trying to buy all the land next to his.

As Neil rode down the winding trail that led down the thousand foot bluff that was the west side of Peacock Canyon, he tried to puzzle out how Ira made so much money in bad years. He'd never liked Ira, then all in one day, he'd found old Rowdy Elliott in a lather, and Ira trying to cut him out with his girl.

Molly had laughed at Ira's efforts, even though her guardian had yelled to high heaven that Ira was an up and comin' man. Old Rowdy hadn't laughed, though. He like to come loose from where he was hitched when Ira offered to buy the Rafter-7. Neil had gotten his aged partner's gun just in time. But Rowdy had offered to skin Ira and use his hide for burro hobbles if he ever poked his ugly nose over the Peacock Canyon rim again

The picture of Ira peeking into the canyon tickled Neil, and he glanced along the high wall. The canyon's steep sides were flecked with copper and iron stains, and when the sun hit it just right, it did look like a Peacock's tail. Molly had picked up a smattering of geology back East and told Neil that the canyon was thousands of years old. She'd once pointed out a bunch of caves just above where he now was, and insisted they'd been homes of some early tribe of Indians. Maybe, Neil admitted to himself, but right now they were used by a bunch of coyotes.

As Doughbelly hit the canyon floor, Neil squirmed around and looking back west saw a dead horse lying on its left side. It hadn't been there when he rode into town, and half hidden behind a mesquite clump, it was hard to see even now. He spun Doughbelly around and the closer he loped to the dead animal, the more he worried. He recognized Popcorn, a big, black, blazed-face favorite of his. The horse was saddled and scrunched down behind the animal almost hidden behind its body, lay Rowdy Elliott.

"Yuh hurt, Rowdy?" Neil yelled as he drew near. The old man testily snapped: "Co'se I am! Pull this big brute off'n me."

Neil dabbed a small noose on Rowdy's saddle horn, snubbed the rope to his own nubbin, and let Doughbelly walk off across the flats. The big bay hit the end of the rope hard, rolling the dead horse off Rowdy's left leg. Neil loped back to meet a grouchy complaint, "I'm 'most winter-killed layin' out here waitin' for somebody to come along."

"What happened?" Neil demanded.

Rowdy shucked off his left boot to inspect a skinny shank that was black and blue except where it was purple and green. Before he replied, Rowdy put his boot on, got to his feet and

hobbled a few steps. "I'll limp a mite for a few days," he grumbled.

Neil wasn't going to let his partner get away with any of his evasive dodges. "Who killed Popcorn?" he demanded.

"I ain't right certain," Rowdy admitted mysteriously, slapping dust from his Mexican serge pants and dirty old vest. "Somebody who shoots a 45-70 from the way the dang thing bellered up there." He waved a vague hand toward the rimrock. "Some'n' who works for Ira Kluger," he added and waited until Neil looked right dumb and interested before he went on waggishly: "He'd more'n likely shot till he got me, only I done a right good job a-playin' dead."

"What makes yuh suspect Ira?" Neil asked.

"Maybe I'm jus' suspicious," Rowdy grumbled, gnawing off a chew of tobacco, "but there's somethin' funny about his bulls. Ever notice 'em?"

Neil nodded. "They're spotted Holsteins an' make derned poor crosses with Herefords."

"Unhun," Rowdy agreed. "They're all belled too. Every mornin' when he turns 'em outa the pen, they graze off south. Long 'bout noon they amble down to the Rio Grande for a drink, an' the first thing yuh know, they're in Mexico. Come sundown, the herder goes after 'em. . . ."

"Yuh're gettin' old, Rowdy," Neil interrupted.

"Reckon I am," the old man admitted grudgingly. "I watched them bulls three nights 'fore I noticed the bells didn't have no clappers in 'em when they came home."

"What's that got to do with some of Ira's men bushwhackin' yuh?" Neil interrupted.

Rowdy's watery gray eyes looked reproachfully at his young partner. He spat at a passing grasshopper and replied, "Wouldn't 'a' had nothin' only I got snoopy. I snuck down to our lower windmill couple of evenin's back, an' roped me one of them bulls. Yes, sir! The clapper *was* gone, but there was a dingus fixed up so's yuh could pack stuff in the bell. This'n was filled with a white kind of powder."

Neil snapped: "Reckon Ira's tryin' to poison our water?"

"I thought of that too," Rowdy agreed. "But I spelled out the word 'cocaine' on the paper it was wrapped in."

"So *that's* how Ira keeps goin' good during a tough year," Neil commented.

"Looks like," Rowdy sighed. "Looks like maybe some of Ira's men saw me messin' with that bull."

"Yuh're one hell of a partner," Neil complained. "Why didn't yuh tell me?"

"Gi'me a leg up," Rowdy suggested, and when Neil kicked out of the left stirrup, the old man mounted. Each standing on one stirrup, their other legs across the seat of the saddle, so's to fool Doughbelly into thinking that he wasn't being ridden double, they started home. The Rafter-7 ranch house was in a cottonwood motte, a good three miles out on the canyon floor.

As they rode along, Rowdy resumed, "I didn't want to bother yuh none about Ira's bulls." Sarcastically, he added, "Yuh wuz off girlin'. Look at yuh—new Flandos boots, yaller pants, a red silk shirt." Pretending amazement, he questioned, "Who the hell chawed the top out'a yuhr hat?"

"Ol' Scott Trafton," Neil admitted hesitantly, and told his story.

Rowdy cackled gleefully. "Dang it, son, can't I ever learn yuh nothin'? I tol' yuh mos' a million times that *all* women 'cept our Mas is jailbait! Why, look at what happened to me."

But Neil didn't want to hear that story again. He knew only too well how Rowdy had spent five years of his youthful life in Santa Fe—because of a woman — another man's wife. Rowdy, riding along the trail one day, had met up with a bull-train. The

skinner had been working over his puny wife with the butt end of the whip and Rowdy interfered. The three cornered fight ended only when Rowdy killed the skinner to save his own life. But he'd had a heck of a time proving that. The skinner's wife swore till she was black in the face that the rambling young cowboy had started the trouble. Nope, Neil didn't want to listen, so he kicked Doughbelly into a lope.

As they dismounted before the rambling adobe house, Neil suggested, "Reckon we better dust off the main room before Scott gits here?"

Rowdy ignored Neil and groaning, limped across the patio to a big rocking chair. As the bow-legged old man squirmed himself comfortable, Neil got to thinking. If people were shooting at folks, be a good idea for the Rafter-7 to tend to business. So he suggested, "Reckon maybe I'd better drift them bulls into the corral for the night?"

Testily, Rowdy replied, "Well! So I have to git most killed 'fore yuh decide to tend to our knittin'?"

Neil grinned and rode off. Out of the corner of his eye he watched his partner roughriding the big rocking chair and spitting at grasshoppers. He looked like he was going to stay hitched for a while, so Neil hurried out to the pasture where they kept their thoroughbred bulls at this season of the year. There were fifty animals, and anyone who wanted to wish the Rafter-7 a lot of bad luck in a bunch, could do so by poisoning the salt in that pasture.

Neil didn't waste much time gathering the herd, but it was sundown when he penned them in a big corral close to the house. He found Lafe Humphries, the lone hired help of the outfit, in the horse corral, but Rowdy was gone from the patio. Neil asked, "Where's that stove-up partner of mine?"

"Oh, Rowdy? I don't know," Lafe replied. "I met him—rather, seen him as I was comin' in. The Old Man gunnin' some'n'? He was goin' up the trail to the rimrock when I saw him, his pants tied on with a shell-belt an' two guns."

Neil explained Rowdy's accident and they went to the house. Neil figured Rowdy could take care of himself, but he was curious as to where the old man might have gone. As they sat down to the supper table, Lafe exclaimed, "Geeze, Neil, I like to forgot. Here's a note I found tacked to the kitchen doo'."

The note was addressed to Neil in his partner's crabbed, angular writing, and it read: "Scott didn't come, so I'm riding in to see him. He may have changed his mind."

Neil agreed that such things might happen, and poured himself a cup of coffee. As he stirred in the sugar he heard a shot, the crack of a high powered rifle. It came from the west rim of Peacock. "Johnnie git yuh gun," Neil commanded, and leaving the table they both got their weapons down from pegs in the kitchen wall.

But Neil couldn't find his new 30-30 carbine. Lafe was positive old Rowdy hadn't been carrying the weapon, but suggested, "Maybe that feller did get somethin'."

"What feller?"

Lafe explained. "After I'd passed Rowdy, I seen a man ride up here from the east. I was 'most a mile from here but I saw him get down and come into the patio. I looked up again and didn't see him. When I gets to the house, there ain't nobody here, but way off 'cross the flats there's a boy lopin' along right pert."

Neil couldn't figure out what that was all about and they hurried outside to find the whole valley hidden in a dim haze of twilight. The wall of Peacock Canyon was a lump of midnight, but off to the east a full moon was coming up. Neil said, "Leave the lamp lit an' the kitchen door open, Lafe, an' yuh hole up out

in the shadows. If anybody comes along, yuh know what to do."

Neil hurried down to the corral and saddled a leggy, chestnut sorrel. West he hurried, cautiously, anxiously, but found nothing, nor anybody. He tied the sorrel in a post-oak thicket, and Indianed up the trail to the rim rock. Everything was quiet except for the rustle of the night wind and the occasional yapping of a lovesick coyote.

Back down the bluff Neil hurried to the corral. He was plenty worried by that lone rifle shot. He'd better ride into town and find Rowdy.

As soon as he reached town, Neil made for the place where he'd most likely find his partner. He found the old-timer—as he'd expected, in Tom Gray's saloon. But quite a crowd had found him first. Wynne Hale, sheriff of Union County, Ira Kluger and Molly Gaines were close to Rowdy, surrounded by quite a few other folks. The big, sloppy sheriff had Rowdy's guns and both old-timers were mad and puzzled. Molly had been crying, but Ira was carrying on, as self righteous as a tent-revival minister. As Neil hurried through the strangely hostile crowd, he heard Ira spouting off: "I'd recognized ol' Scott Trafton and was tryin' to catch up with him, but he beat me to where the trail dips down along the Peacock Canyon. I'd heard Rowdy's partner rowin' with the banker earlier today, so when I heard the shot, I rides up quick. Down the trail a ways I see Rowdy packin' Scott's body into one of them coyote caves that honeycomb the canyon wall. He slung a rifle in after it an' plugged up the mouth of the cave with rocks."

Wynne Hale, who feared nothing in this world but his sister-in-law, asked: "Yuh didn't ride on down, huh?"

"Oh, no," Ira assured him quickly. "Yuh see, I didn't have no gun."

"Yuh got one now," the sheriff sniffed, pointing to the Colt on Ira's right leg.

"I mean a rifle," Ira explained. "'Sides, I'm a great'n' to let the law handle killin's."

Neil pushed up close and asked, "W'a'sa matter, Rowdy?"

The little old man sighed forbearingly. "Don' know, son, 'less'n all these folks is gone crazy. I ride into town slow like, 'n' when I get here, Ira an' this poor ol' half-witted Wynne an' these other burros say I killed Scott."

"That's yuhr story," Ira sneered.

Rowdy yelped in anger and dived for Ira's throat. Wynne Hale caught the little old cowman and ordered, "Ca'm down, Rowdy, Ca'm down. If yuh did it, yuh did it. If yuh didn't, some'n' else did."

Rowdy glared at his old friend and groaned: "No wonder they named yuh sheriff: Wha-cha goin' to do about it?"

"Bed yuh down in the jail house for the night, the first thing," the sheriff replied.

"How about goin' out and lookin' for the body?" Neil demanded.

"Ain't much use 'til morning," the sheriff complained. "There's thousands of caves in that canyon wall, an' Ira says he ain't certain which'n' Rowdy used. An' stubborn as this mule Rowdy is, he wouldn't tell, if he knew."

"What about that money?" Neil demanded.

"*What* money?" Ira, Rowdy and the sheriff wanted to know.

Lying quickly, easily, Neil explained. "Money I gave Scott," and paused so Rowdy and Molly could gather their wits before he went on. "After me'n' Scott rowed, I rode out of town 'til I cools down a bit. Then I circle back west of town to the cottonwood thicket where Molly'n' me'z been meetin'. She'z there an' tells me

that ol' Scott himself'z been in a bad way for money recently. Molly'n' me'z been savin' sort of an ace in the hole to get married on, so we decide to pay Scott *that* money on the Rafter-7 notes. He'd gone when we got to Molly's house, but I got the money an' catch up with Scott just as he rode out-a town."

It was very quiet in the saloon as Neil stopped. He looked at Molly, hoping his lie was so outlandish she'd figure he was up to something and back him up. She did, faltering: "That's . . . that's what happened. Then Neil came back to me."

"How *much* money?" Sheriff Hale asked.

"Little over five thousand dollars," Neil replied and heard several quick drawn breaths.

"Yuh darned fool," Wynne Hale observed, but didn't designate anyone. To Rowdy he said, "Come on, yuh bow-laigged idiot, I'll put yuh in jail."

Out of the saloon they went and while the others watched, Molly, Neil, Rowdy and the sheriff mounted the horses. Neil missed Ira, but the man joined them as they left the hitch-rack before the saloon. Neil wanted a chance to talk to Molly, but Ira rode with them instead of joining Rowdy and the sheriff, who were a few strides ahead. Ira started to say something, but Neil rode close and snapped, "Open your ugly face to me, an' I'll make yuh look like one a yuhr bulls! Only yuh'll be spotted black an' blue 'stead of black and white!"

Ira said: "Good night, Miss Molly," and, wheeling his horse, loped off. Neil watched the man go through the clear moonlight, and it struck him that Ira seemed anxious to leave.

Molly interrupted his thoughts to ask, "What did you mean by lying about that money, Neil?"

"I ain' right certain," he replied. "Only thing I know, Rowdy didn't kill Scott."

"I know what," she said quickly. "Daddy Scott and Ira had a row when he came back after you'd gone. They made me leave the room, but I overheard Daddy Scott tell Ira that if he wasn't more careful about those bulls they'd both get into trouble."

Neil said, "He did, huh?" and sagged back in his saddle. That tied old Scott Trafton right up with Ira's dope running. How he'd gotten mixed up in it or why, Neil couldn't figure, nor did he particularly want to know. No one held it much against the old banker for having mavericked a few calves from the big X.I.T. outfit years ago. But this was different. Old Scott probably had a crooked streak in him. But he was dead now, and with him, as far as Neil was concerned, died his secret.

Old Rowdy was a different problem. Neil now suspected that the man dim-witted Lafe had seen riding away from the Rafter-7 had been one of Ira's hands. As they neared the jail, a little way out of town, Neil said, "Come along, Molly," and closing the gap between themselves and the other pair quickly, rode close and shoved his gun into Wynne Hale's ribs.

Catching his partner's play, Rowdy snatched his shell-belt and guns from the sheriff's saddle horn and gloated. "Everybody ain't crazy! Wha'cha' know, son?"

Certain that Wynne would take his star seriously, and break up the play if he got a chance, Neil kept his gun in the sheriff's ribs as he explained: "Nothing . . . only, someone stole my .30-30, probably one of Ira's men, 'cause Ira'z been tryin' to buy the Rafter-7. Looks like Rowdy'n' Scott missed each other. Different trails, maybe, but the boy who stole my ca'bine met Scott. I'm just hopin' whoever bushwhacked the ol' rascal 'll high-tail it back after the money."

"How yuh know he didn't git it in the fu'st place?" the sheriff demanded.

"Not a chance." Neil answered him.

"All right then, son, put yuhr gun

up," the sheriff agreed. "I got a lick er two of sense. I see what yuh mean. An' if they don't show up, Rowdy'll have more brains'n to go on the buck."

That was mutually understood as the four swung east and riding close together, loped into the path of the rising moon. The sheriff and Rowdy were two tough old-timers thinking only of justice. But Neil had a head full of problems. He was certain Ira had fired the fatal shot. But to clear Rowdy, they'd have to catch Ira digging out the body. And when they did, Neil could think of nothing that would keep Ira from telling all he knew of his deals with Scott. Neil didn't want that to happen for Molly's sake.

As they reached the rim of Peacock Canyon, the sheriff complained, "Where we goin' to look?"

"We'd better ride quite a ways down," Neil replied. "With this bright moonlight, we can see whoever comes and close in on them."

Down the incline they hurried, almost to the canyon floor and pulled off the trail. They'd just dismounted and hidden their horses when Rowdy cautioned: "Here comes someone. . . ."

Listening, they heard a fast ridden horse coming down the trail. As the noise came closer, they made out a horse and its rider. There was little hesitancy, little searching. When the rider reached a certain point, he swung off the trail, and spurring his horse cruelly, climbed the bluff.

Neil ordered: "Come on. He's makin' so much noise, he won't hear us." Sneaking from thicket to thicket, they closed in on their quarry. As the circle tightened, Neil made out Ira clawing rocks from the mouth of a cave. No one needed orders; they all watched him clear the entrance. He crawled inside, and for a moment, all was silent.

When the man crawled from the cave, he was cursing disappointedly, and hurried down hill toward his panting horse. Neil pushed Molly behind a big rock, stood up and commanded: "Put 'em up, Ira!"

Ira paused a second and slapped leather, firing wildly. Neil didn't fire wildly, and his bullet hit Ira's right shoulder. The man spun around, but struggled back to his feet. The sheriff closed in on him, saying, "Yuh sure put the rope 'round yuhr neck, Ira. Nobody but the man who put the body in there could 'a' found the cave."

Ira seemed to realize that also. He let the sheriff get close and smashed out with his left hand. Wynne Hale rolled down hill, tumbling into Rowdy. Both old men fell and Ira made a flying leap for his horse. Neil held his fire, but Rowdy didn't. Regretfully, Neil saw his partner roll to a sitting position and come up shooting.

Two quick shots he slammed after Ira. The fleeing horse screamed, and pitching forward mid-stride, rolled over. Rowdy got to his feet and grumbled, "Well, anyway, that makes us hunk for that black ho'se yuh killed, Mister Kluger."

Down hill they hurried, and as they reached the tumbled pile of man and horse, Wynne Hale said, "Yuh're more'n even, Rowdy. Ira's broke his neck."

So he had, and Neil hurried back to where Molly was crouched behind a boulder. He found her crying softly and took her in his arms.

The three started for their horses and the sheriff called, "Hey, Neil, if yuh ain't squeamish, maybe yuh better get that money a yuhrn."

Neil laughed hollowly, and replied: "There never was no money, Wynne."

"No money!" Rowdy grunted. "What kind'a doin's was this?"

"Believe yuh're right about women," Neil told his partner ambiguously, and put an arm around Molly. "They're jail-bait. Look how Molly helped me bait that trap for Ira by backin' up my windy lies."

THE LOST NIGGERHEAD

". . . an' there was wire-gold stickin' outa the canyon wall! Tom Purvis, he loaded up his burros. . . ."

The campfire story of the lost Niggerhead Mine.

I

THERE was a buzzard on a tree-limb who saw the two men come up the little canyon. There was always a buzzard somewhere around this spot. For many years buzzards had nested in a place not far away, and very often one watched, as now. But it was a long time since men had come riding here. These men looked about them and chose a campsite. The tall man—the one with prison-pallor still on his face—set to work in the near-darkness. The fat man descended from his mount and regarded his surroundings with an alert, sparrowlike inquisitiveness.

"Um. Safe here, Butch?" He watched his companion's labor and smirked. "We don't want anybody buttin' in. You just outa the pen an' the hunt still on, an' me in bad comp'ny." He snickered at the last. "Bad comp'ny, Butch. That's you."

The tall man snarled, without ceasing his work. He stretched a rope corral for the four horses—two pack-horses and two ponies—around certain conveniently placed saplings. The fire was catching up. The tall man worked expertly, with the minimum of lost motion. He was an old hand at it. Chaps and six-gun fitted easily on him, though his hair was cropped short and the pallor of the penitentiary showed up even by the firelight.

The fat man sat down comfortably.

"Never been in these parts before," he observed amiably. "Um, The Niggerhead Mine was somewheres around heah, wasn't

And the Way to It Was Lined With the Bones of Dead Men

By MURRAY LEINSTER

Author of "Ten Grand," etc.

it? I sold a map to it once. Got a hundred an' a quarter. Had the story down pat. Sucker from the East."

He smirked again at the memory. The tall man came back to the fire. He began to prepare supper.

"Useful man, Butch. Useful. Camp-cookery an' other arts. As good at these tricks as—um—stickups. Eh?"

The tall man turned black, hate-filled eyes upon him and said, "Shut your damned mouth!"

THE fat man snickered a second time. "Ungrateful! I get you outa the pen, just for a split of the loot Jed Davis stole from y' gang. Now you cuss me. Bad, Butch! But no kidding—uh—safe heah?"

"Plenty!" snapped the tall man. "Pecos's ten miles away. You know how rough the goin' is. Nobody runs cattle heah. Seen any signs o' humans in these hills?"

"Yeah," said the fat man unexpectedly. "One place was all dug up, once. Four —five miles back."

The tall man spat. The buzzard on the tree-limb watched, blinking in the firelight.

"Huntin' the Niggerhead," said the tall man. "They quit that now. Nobody'll come heah. We didn't leave tracks. T'morrow you ride on in to Pecos, pick up Jed Davis, toll him out heah, an' I get to work on him."

The fat man looked at his companion inquisitively.

"Y'goin' to be rough with him, Butch?"

"I'm goin'—" the tall man panted in sudden rage—"I'm goin' to roast 'im over a slow fire till he turns over all he's got, an' then—then I'm goin' to keep on roastin'!"

The fat man settled back comfortably. Darkness grew deeper. Suddenly it was night. The blaze of the fire grew brighter by contrast with the deepening shadows all about. The saplings and an occasional taller tree seemed to draw darkness to them like a mantle. A few bright stars twinkled into being overhead. The smell of cooking spread round about the campfire.

"I'm kinda worried," said the fat man meditatively, " 'bout Jed Davis. That was three years agone he double-crossed you fellas. A fella can spend a lot o' money in three years."

"Not him," said the tall man grimly. "Not him! He'll have it—an' I'll get it. Y'can bet on it. Th' skunk sellin' us out! Two of us killed. Two more shot up an' sent to the pen! So's he could run out with that stuff we'd got. Thirty thousan' dollars in gold!"

The fat man smirked.

"Fifteen for you an' fifteen for me," he said amiably, "or divide in p'portion. It cost somethin' to fix up for y'escape, Butch."

THE tall man scowled. He ate voraciously. The fat man ate with a noisy delicacy, and at last settled back and whittled out a little sliver with which to pick his teeth. The tall man sat staring at the fire, his eyes filled with a rage which seemed habitual. The fire blazed up to its highest and began to die down. The buzzard blinked drowsily. He prepared to sleep. With sunset, coolness had descended. The fat man threw more sticks on the blaze.

"We need s'more wood, Butch."

The tall man rose. He fumbled about beneath the saplings. One armful of dead limbs and small branches. Another. He threw down the second and relapsed into his savage contemplation of the fire. The fat man regarded the tangle of wood with his invariable alert attention. He suddenly stood up and went over to the heap. He stooped and drew something from the mass.

"Butch!" His eyes were glittering suddenly. "Look't!"

The thing he held had felt rather like a smooth fallen branch. But held up in the firelight, it was not a branch at all. It was whiter than any fallen branch would be, and there was a tangled, torn shred of cloth cemented to it by woods-mould.

"The Niggerhead Mine, Butch!" said the fat man eagerly. His blandness was all

gone. "There was four dead men left at the Niggerhead Mine! This was a man once!"

The tall man stared at the thing in the fat one's hand. It was a long-bone, and the shred of cloth had once been part of a man's clothing.

"Y'remember," said the fat man, panting a little. His face was rapt. "Y'remember the story. The Niggerhead Mine that ol' Tom Purvis found——"

THE story is tradition all through the Southwest. Tom Purvis was a desert rat, a prospector who had made some tiny strikes in long years of gold-hunting—just enough to encourage him. Most people thought him crazy. But enough knew of his intention to outfit at Pecos and prospect in the Bookshelf range to bear out the story of the Niggerhead when it became known.

The tale was that within a few miles of Pecos he came upon a little canyon with a black rock in the shape of a negro's head near its mouth. He chipped at the rock within the canyon, idly—and wire-gold showed. He had two burros with him, and he loaded them down. He took six hundred pounds of ore back to Dos Almas, instead of on to Pecos. He sold the six hundred pounds of ore for ten thousand dollars and went back for more, and to post his monuments. But four men trailed him. They jumped him as he started to load up again, and he shot down two of them at the first rush. They hadn't known he packed a six-gun. The other two besieged him in his camp, firing at his every movement. They wounded him, badly. After a day and night, he played dead. He lay motionless for twenty-four hours, while they watched for a sign of life. Then they came into his camp, and—wounded as he was—he wiped them out in a last burst of shots. Then he crawled to one of their horses, pulled himself upon its back, and set out for Pecos and aid. He rode into the town coughing blood and dying. But before he died he told where the Niggerhead Mine was, and begged that his nephew back East be given at least a share of it.

The fat man licked his lips.

"Nobody ever found it, Butch. They knew it was no more'n ten miles from Pecos, but they never found it. In a li'l canyon by a black rock, with four dead men layin' around. Heah's one of the dead men. Somewheah inside o' a hundred yards of us is the Niggerhead Mine!"

The tall man strode back to the saplings from which he had brought the firewood. He rummaged about while the fat man babbled:

"I sold a map to it once, Butch. Got a hundred an' a quarter from a sucker from back East. Neview of Tom Purvis, he was, growed up an' come west for his health. I told him I hadda paper Tom Purvis'd left with somebody, an' I sat up all night drawin' it an' makin' it look old with coffee."

The tall man wrenched at something on the ground. He peered down and came back for a glowing brand from the fire. The fat man followed him raptly. They stared down. The watching buzzard blinked at the moving point of fire.

"Hell!" snarled the tall man. "He ain't been dead long enough to be one o' the gang that killed Tom Purvis. Clo'es woulda rotted away in twenty years. This fella was bumped no more'n a coupla years back. Skeleton's picked clean, but——"

HE STOOPED and held the burning brand close. A ring, with a stone that gleamed brightly beneath its covering of dirt. The torch began to quiver suddenly in the hand that held it. There was the gleam of gold somewhere. A gold-

capped tooth. And then the tall man pointed, while his breath came in gasps of strangling wrath.

"That gun!" It was rusty and fouled beyond any possible use as a weapon. It was a tiny, double-barreled derringer. A rusted six-gun was buried in the earth. This derringer lay on top of the ground. "That gun! It's—Jed Davis!"

The tall man stood up and flung the burning brand from him in a searing passion. He cursed in gasps, in pantings, in a maniacal fury such as would not come if he had lost anything less precious than the hope of killing, lingeringly, a man he hated. The tall man was as a madman because someone else, not less than two years back, had killed a man he wished to kill himself.

But the buzzard, with the torch extinguished, put its head under its wing and slept.

II

TWO hours later the buzzard was again uneasily awake. The fat man had stuck two resinous branches in the ground, for light, and he poked and peered and investigated. He had pulled the grasses away from that certain spot. Now he dug two or three inches into the earth, shifting the dirt between his fingers. He found coins, and rubbed them and squinted at their faces in the torch-light. He excavated the six-gun and examined it. He heaped his finds in his hat and went back to the fire, where he turned them over and over, meditating. He examined each individual object with an alert curiosity which became more and more sparrowlike as his brain worked busily over what he had found.

The tall man sat staring into the fire with his face twisted in a look of unspeakable fury. His hands clenched and unclenched. Now and again he uttered a sound which might have been a sob of rage. The look of killing wrath was upon him.

The fat man said meditatively:

"Butch, how'd y'like to get the fella that bumped Jed Davis?"

"I'd kill 'im," panted the tall man. "I'd choke th' life outa him! I had it all figured out how I'd kill Jed! I' been hungry to heah him groan an' cry! I' dreamed o' seein' him roast in torment! I'd kill the man that robbed me of it!"

"I gotta idea, Butch," said the fat man amiably. "I figger maybe we can get him. But not just t' kill 'im." He snickered. "Maybe he bumped Jed for the money he had. Maybe he'd give us what's lef' of it to be let go. I'm goin' in to Pecos in the mornin'."

The tall man stood up. He took a flaming brand and strode to where he could look down at what had been his enemy. He cursed those fragments with a passion that was the more terrible because impotent. The fat man smirked at him. When the tall man stopped, he said:

"I gotta idea, Butch. Listen heah! Jed was bumped, because I picked up a .45 bullet that was some mushroomed when it went in him. I picked up some money, an' that six-gun an' the derringer, an' some odds an' ends. Y'lissenin'?"

The tall man came wearily back to the fire.

"The six-gun was used," said the fat man meditatively. "There's shells in the cylinder, mostly green rust now. They was shot out. One o' the two barrels of the derringer was shot out, too. T'other was loaded. He hadda cartridge-belt on, an' it was full. Now listen. His boots was new. Not hardly worn atall."

"Bought," snarled the tall man, "with what he stole from us!"

"Yeah. But new-bought. Pecos was his home town, huh?"

"Yeah."

"He came to these parts after double-crossin' you-all. He had his loot with him. You-all were either dead or in the pen. He figgered he was safe enough, but you-all might tell on him. So he'd hide out near town till he was sure nobody was huntin' him——"

"Maybe," said the tall man thickly, "but I aimed to git him myself, an' some skunk's beat me to it!"

"Mmmmm." The fat man nodded. "He'd make himself a hideout till he was sure he wasn't told on. He'd cache that stuff all o' you had stole together, too. Wouldn't he? In his hideout or near it?"

The tall man clenched his hands. It was assent.

"We know what he'd prob'ly do," the fat man pursued. "Now you figger this. Somebody bumped him. After a gun-fight, because Jed had done some shootin' too. Now, if't was a sheriff or somebody like that, they'd ha' buried him. If it was somebody that hadda reason to bump him an' get clear, they'd ha' buried him. But this fella didn't care. Why'd he kill Jed—an' not trouble to bury him, Butch?"

The tall man cursed the dead bones of Jed Davis.

"The fella that killed 'im," said the fat man convincingly, "did it for the loot Jed had cached away. Your loot, Butch. Yours, an' the other fellas that're dead or in the pen. He found out wheah Jed had cached that stuff, an' he killed him, an' he ook it. *Mmm.* It's likely he follered Jed to that there hideout an' shot him theah. We' better hunt around for some kinda hideout right around heah, Butch."

"Y'didn't notice. I did," the tall man snarled. "Skeleton of a horse back a ways —maybe fifty yards. Grass growin' through the ribs."

"I'm goin' to look at it, Butch! It's kinda important."

HE STIRRED up the fire and took a flaming brand from it. The tall man reluctantly arose and led the way. The buzzard stirred uneasily. Five minutes of search. Five minutes of inspection. When they came back to the fire the fat man was rubbing his hands.

"It's goin' to work, Butch! I gotta hunch! Saddle lef' on that horse. Jed was runnin' away. T'other fella was chasin' him close. Jed's horse fell down, an' Jed run on. An' the fella came after him an' Jed kep' blazin' away an' emptied his six-gun when he was cornered, an' pulled that derringer an' got in one more shot, an' then the other fella bumped him—cold! An' then the other fella stopped an' put a bullet through the head o' that horse—it had a broke leg, y' remember—an' went off an' picked up Jed's loot."

The tall man swore again, thickly but without hope. The fat man smirked.

"Just figger one thing more, Butch. Just supposin' it was a fella ridin' through that saw Jed at his cache. He'd ha' chased Jed away—an' Jed was runnin'—an' took the loot an' rid on. But this fella chased Jed an' killed 'im. Why?"

"I'd kill 'im," snarled the tall man. "Jed Davis was mine t' kill!"

The fat man beamed.

"Nope. This other fella killed Jed because Jed knew him. He couldn't leave Jed alive, because he aimed to take Jed's loot an' stay around Pecos. Don't y'see, Butch? The fella that killed Jed is right down theah in Pecos now, with most or maybe all o' Jed's loot still on hand! An' I gotta trick to get him!"

The tall man half roused.

"Who is it?" he demanded thickly. "Tell me, an' I'll——"

The fat man snickered.

"Wait a while! We'll get him, prob'ly, but it's goin' to take sense. Now, remember the Niggerhead Mine? Well, now, I'm goin' to go down to Pecos, an'——"

He leaned forward. His face was illumined by the leaping, flickering flames of the fire. His expression was alert, and bland, and full of satisfaction. As he talked, he lowered his voice so that the crackling of the fire and the stamping of the horses nearby sounded more loudly than his words.

At the end, he slapped his knees in admiration of his own cleverness. He fairly crowed in triumph. And even the tall man had lost his hopelessness. His rage was undiminished, but it was anticipative rather than baffled. And somehow, it was

even less pleasant than before. But the buzzard blinked itself back to sleep. The men were quiet, anyhow.

III

IF THE buzzard had been watching—and perhaps it was—it would have seen exactly what the fat man did next day. He rode comfortably down to Pecos. He purchased supplies in the stores of that somnolent cow-town. He talked chattily of this and that and the other thing. The buzzard might have guessed, even, that the fat man talked of the Niggerhead Mine. When he headed back into the hills with his purchases, the buzzard would have known that he had announced his intention of hunting for the Niggerhead Mine. Some few years back, there were any number of men who hunted for that lost source of infinite wealth. A reasonably well-informed buzzard would have recognized his apparent purpose from his destination alone, which was the hills to the southwest of Pecos. And so far the buzzard would have had exactly the same and exactly as much information as the citizens of Pecos itself.

It would only have been when the buzzard saw the fat man greet his companion in the hills; when the said companion hid his camp even more securely than before; and when the fat man set out on a lonely hundred-mile trip to the nearest hard-rock mine where wire-gold was to be found, that the buzzard would have been any better-informed than men. And even that knowledge would have been of no more use to a citizen of Pecos than to the buzzard.

Days passed. The tall man tended camp and nursed his wrath, alone. The prison-pallor upon his face was gradually replaced by a healthier tan. The hypothetically watching buzzard would have seen the fat man return, with a small sack he guarded carefully. He would have seen a conference between the fat man and his companion, in which the fat man amiably explained many things, rested, ate hugely, and then remounted with his small bag and at least one certain object from the camp. He went at a comfortable pace toward Pecos until he was within a mile of the town. Then he urged his horse to a hilarious speed. He went riding into the little cow-town with every appearance of one drunk with good fortune.

The buzzard, *if* it had been watching, would have seen signs of great excitement about Pecos. There were runnings-about, there were gatherings of men, and always the focus of each group was one man who held in his hand what might have been a lump of rock in which wire-gold showed plainly. Pecos hummed like a hive at swarming-time.

But at night-fall all buzzards go to sleep. So no eye could possibly have seen the fat man sneak out of town in the middle of the night like one afraid of being trailed for his secret, nor the many and devious trails he followed to confuse any possible trailers.

THE tall man was cooking breakfast when the fat man rejoined him. Coffee of a corrosive strength sent its aroma among the saplings of the hidden camp. Beans and frying bacon tinged the crisp morning air with an ineffable fragrance. The fat man rode into view, sleepy but beaming. He alighted and said:

"Um! Breakfast! Useful man, Butch. Wheah's my plate?"

The tall man filled it; put a mug of blistering coffee beside it.

"How'd it go?"

"I'm goin' to make some money outa this." The fat man snickered. "All the town is crazy, Butch. I'm goin' to sell maps an' rights to stake claims nex' to mine, an' clean up."

He began to eat, noisily.

"But did y'find him?" demanded the tall man savagely. "The fella that killed Jed Davis?"

"I reckon I did." The fat man snickered again. "I went in, whoopin'. I'd found the Niggerhead Mine, I says, an' everybody knew from last time I was theah, that I was huntin' for it. I showed 'em those wire-gold samples I' got over at Bellews. High-grade stuff, that was. They went plumb crazy. But I talked careful. Yes, I says, it's like Tom Purvis said it was. A li'l canyon with a black rock near the mouth of it. But, I says, there wasn't four dead men in theah. Theah was five. I told 'em I was ridin' along, prospectin', an' I saw a dead horse with a saddle on it, long dead an' nothin' but bones. I went on maybe a hundred yards, an' saw what'd been a dead man. I showed 'em that derringer Jed Davis carried an' said I picked it up off'n him. The fella that bumped Jed Davis remembers that derringer, Butch! An' I said I rode up the canyon an' saw some more heaps o' bones, an' then I started huntin' for that black rock, an' I found it. An' I said I went on up the canyon an' the wire-gold was stickin' outa the canyon wall. Pecos is crazy, Butch!"

The tall man showed his teeth.

"But y'ain't sure," he snarled, "that the fella that killed Jed was in town! He mighta gone away!"

"Nix! I talked a lot when I was in town theah sayin' I was outfittin'. I said I was scared somebody mighta found the Niggerhead, an' I asked questions. The fella that bumped Jed ain't gone. I know!"

"How?" demanded the tall man.

"I saw him change color when he saw Jed's derringer!" The fat man snickered. "I was watchin' him because I was kinda worried he might recognize me. I dealt with him once. I made a hundred an' a quarter outa him. He was a sucker then, an' he's a sucker still. He knows I' found Jed, an' he figgers sooner or later other folks are goin' to rec-nize him too. He thinks I'm gone off to register my claim, an' he's comin' up heah. For one thing he aims to stake him a claim as near mine as he can. For the other, he's goin' to fix it so nobody else fin's Jed. Y'wait an' see, Butch! It's goin' to be good!"

The tall man drew a deep breath. "An' when he comes, I'm goin' to choke the life outa him."

The fat man shook his head.

"Not't first, you ain't," he said blandly. "I'm goin' to handle him, Butch. He's a sucker, an' y'have to know how to handle a sucker. If y'want to know, he's—" the fat man's snicker was audible—"he's Tom Purvis' neview. I rec'nized him the first time I was in Pecos an' asked about him. Neview of the man that foun' the Niggerhead in the firs' place. Years back, he bought a map from me to lead him to it. An' now—now—" for once the fat man laughed aloud—"now he's married to Jed Davis' widder! He bumped Jed off for the woman, an' he ain't never had the nerve to dig up Jed's cache! 'Cause Jed's wife is a right moral female. Figger that out, Butch! Knowin' all this time wheah Jed's loot is hid, an' not darin' to dig it up because his wife 'ud tell on him! Ain't he a sucker?"

The tall man licked his lips.

"Thirty thousan'—if he ain't dared touch it. When'll he be along?"

"Soon," said the fat man. He downed the last of his coffee. "Half o' Pecos is goin' huntin' all over again for the Niggerhead Mine. An' he knows wheah it is—he thinks! He's goin' to try to get heah first, to hide what's lef' of Jed's body so's nobody else will ever fin' it. He's scared. Maybe he started las' night. I dunno. He could come straight heah, it's certain, because heah's wheah he killed Jed."

WITH swift movements, the tall man began to scatter the fire.

"No need to scare him away by showin' smoke," he rasped. "W'en I get my han's on him. . . ."

He went efficiently about the obliteration of the camp. In minutes, it was as if

men had never been at this place before. He motioned to the fat man and they withdrew behind a screen of saplings. Then there was silence. Wind rustled the leaves of the scrawny trees. After a long time a jack-rabbit ventured timidly out into the open. Hidden away, the horses made *hrroughing* noises, and one of them rolled over with a great crackling of bushes.

Then, a long time later, a wide-winged bird soared lazily down into the little canyon. He alighted with the clumsiness with which buzzards always do alight in trees, and sat there blinking uneasily.

That was all that happened in the canyon until, with a faint, metallic clanking of a horse's hoofs on stone, a rider appeared.

He was not an impressive figure. He was rather below the average height. But he rode easily, and his work-worn clothes and the weatherbeaten Stetson on his head did not look like the outfit of a man who knew the whereabouts of a small-sized fortune in stolen treasure. His face, too, was not that of a murderer. It was grim, now. He bore himself with the air of a man with something unpleasant to do, and resolutely intent on doing it. His eyes moved here and there, searching for recognizable landmarks. It was notable that there was no furtiveness in them. When he moved his eyes, he turned his whole head—sure sign that a man commonly moves with forthrightness.

He saw the bones of the horse and reined in, looking down at it. The buzzard blinked as he dismounted and labored at getting up the ragged remnants of leather that had been the saddle. He heaped them on his own horse and came on, on foot.

He found the ashes of a week-old campfire. He walked around it, inspecting the ground. He shrugged. Then he stood erect and looked here and there, evidently trying to line up long-forgotten and much-changed marks with an event of years past. At the end, he strode directly for a certain spot. He stopped there, looking down with his lips set grimly.

The tall man snarled under his breath. He made a movement as if to rise. The fat man held him back. He was grinning.

"Leave 'im be, Butch,' he whispered. "Y'don't know how to handle a sucker. Leave 'im to me. I know!"

THE newcomer turned to his horse. He removed a blanket from behind his saddle. He spread it on the ground. With the air of one steeling himself to a task for which he felt an invincible repugnance, he worked while the two in hiding watched. The buzzard blinked wisely from his perch in the trees. These men were not near the tree-stump which hid a nest, but he watched nevertheless. Then the newcomer folded the blanket with its grisly contents and fastened it on his horse again.

At that moment the two first comers appeared. The tall man had his hand on the gun at his hip, and his lips were set in a snarl of purest hatred. The fat man smirked blandly.

"H'llo," said the fat man. "You knew just the spot I was talkin' about, didn't y', Mistuh Purvis?"

The tall man snarled inarticulately.

The newcomer swung quickly, his hand at his hip, too. Then he dropped it. A quick pallor underlay his tan for an instant. Then he said evenly:

"Yes, I knew the place you were talking about. I was here a couple of years ago. I didn't know this was the Nigger-head Mine canyon, though."

The fat man snickered.

"It ain't. I aimed to get the fella that killed my friend Jed Davis out heah. So I fixed it that the fella that killed him would come right heah. You' come."

The tall man roared suddenly. "Yeah! An' I'm goin'——"

"Shut up, Butch," said the fat one

blandly. "I'm handlin' this! D'you understand me, Mistuh Purvis? We two, my frien' an' myself, we aimed to get the man that killed our pal, Jed Davis. I went in to Pecos an' tol' my li'l story, showin' Jed's derringer. Theah wasn't but one man in the world would know the way to wheah he'd find the owner of that derringer. That one man'd be the one who killed him. That's you!"

Again the newcomer said evenly, "Yes. I did kill him. I'm damned glad of it."

The tall man roared furiously.

"He was mine t' kill! He was——"

The fat man fairly yelped in anger.

"You blamed fool, Butch! Shut y'mouth!" Then he turned again to the newcomer, snarling. "A'right! You killed Jed Davis. We got the goods on you. We got y'confession. Y'can hang for it! Now, what's it worth t'you for us to keep our mouths shut?"

The newcomer regarded him with a queer, deceptive calm.

"Not much. I'm not rich. What I've got, my family needs. And if it's blackmail you're planning—it don't work. I don't start paying. Go and say what you please and prove what you please. You'll get nothing out of it, and you'll probably land in trouble."

The tall man howled in wrath. He surged forward.

"Lookaheah, you!" he bellowed. "Either y'goin' to tell me wheah——"

The fat man shouted him down. For seconds they roared at each other, the fat man in a frenzy of rage, the tall man in a blood-lusting passion. The newcomer regarded them very coldly. At an instant when they were glaring at each other, his hand moved swiftly to his hip and away again, and at that moment the watching buzzard on the tree-limb blinked and shifted his feet uneasily. But the newcomer did not shoot. He did not even have the gun in sight when the fat man, victorious in the exchange of abuse, turned savagely upon him again.

"My partner an' me," said the fat man savagely, we' decided to kinda let you defend y'self. We was aimin' to find out who killed Jed an' then bump him. Why'd you kill him? Remember, we know a lot more'n you suppose! Try lyin', an' we kill yuh!"

The tall man added in a voice of choked rage, "Yeah—an' slow!"

The newcomer looked steadily from one to the other. One hand was now hidden beneath the folded blanket with its contents. He could kill one of these two men, and possibly both, before they could shoot him down. And they knew him to be the man who had killed Jed Davis. But he did not shoot. He spoke, quietly.

"I remember you now." His eyes rested on the fat man. "I came out west, a sick man and dying, and you took nearly my last dollar for a faked map to the Niggerhead Mine. My uncle was the man who found it. I was the one who was supposed to get it. You swindled me."

The fat man, despite newly-revealed savagery, smirked and grinned.

"Yeah. I remember it."

"I came on to Pecos, to hunt the Niggerhead while I lived," said the last-comer to the canyon evenly. "I followed your map, or tried to. It showed not one landmark that was right. Not one that had ever existed. You must have drawn that map from your imagination."

The fat man smirked again. "An' I made a dam' good job of it."

"Yes. So good that I nearly starved, hunting in the hills for something that would agree with the map you'd given me. I got back to Pecos a barely living skeleton. I had no money, and no hope. A woman nursed me. It was Jed Davis' wife."

"A right moral woman," said the fat man blandly. "Yeah. She would from what I heah."

"I got stronger. I got a job. I got my health back again. A year—two years, Jed Davis was gone. Nobody knew where. Then came word he'd been killed in Malagua."

THE tall man snarled. "He wasn't. He was shot up. I was with him. But he wa'n't killed."

"True," said the newcomer evenly. "But his wife thought he was dead. She was—rather glad of it. So was I. I asked her to marry me. She accepted me."

The fat man snickered. "I see't now! I see't!"

"We had been married almost a year when Jed Davis came to the house under cover of night. I saw him. I recognized him. I'd seen his picture. I hustled him away from the house before my wife could see him. He was hiding. He'd been one of a gang—but you know that!"

The tall man uttered a wrathful, snarling sound that was confirmation.

"He'd been hiding out, near Pecos. I—had reason for not telling my wife of the ghastly mistake we'd made, just then. I told him. And he laughed. He said that under the circumstances he'd depend on me to keep him in food and liquor for a while. I went with him to his hide-out."

The fat man's eyes glittered, but the newcomer went on.

"For a while I did feed him. I did supply him with liquor. Then he realized he had no more need to hide. Whatever he feared was not going to happen."

"He got sure," said the fat man, "that his friends wa'nt goin' to tell on him—even though he'd double-crossed 'em."

"Perhaps. He said he had a lot of money. He was coming in to Pecos to show it off. He was going to lord it over the men who'd looked down on him before. I pleaded with him, but he laughed at me. He showed me pockets-full of gold-pieces."

The tall man snarled. The fat one licked his lips.

"He was coming in to town that afternoon. I went home and got a gun. I didn't usually carry one—then. I went back to his hide-out. He had his money out of its hiding-place, scattered on the floor. He saw me armed and shot at me. But he was scared. I shot back. I wounded him. He ran away, in a panic. He had a horse all saddled. He jumped on it. He had a good start, but I followed. I knew he had to be killed. I chased him two miles, he dodging and twisting and howling offers to split his loot. A hundred yards back I got his horse with a lucky shot. He stopped at bay right here, foaming at the mouth with terror. I killed him." The newcomer stopped, and added evenly. "Three months later, my son was born. That's why I killed him."

Silence. The buzzard on the tree-limb blinked and shifted his weight back and forth. The tall man rumbled to himself. The fat man licked his lips once more. Each of them was visualizing heaps of gold-pieces scattered over a dirt floor.

"Wheah's the money?" asked the fat man, his voice shaking.

"In his hide-out," said the newcomer evenly. "I didn't kill him for that. I left it there. I've never been back. Neither has anybody else ever found it. People don't often come in these hills."

"Wheah's that hide-out?" The tall man snarled the question, instinctively menacing.

"Two miles that way." The newcomer pointed—with his left hand. "A narrow arroyo with yellow walls. Big clump of mesquite filling its mouth. Cave around the first bend, facing south. He had a sort of corral for his horse."

"I—I remember!" panted the fat man. "We passed it! Y'remember, Butch?"

THE manner of the newcomer, even and a bit contemptuous, had been convincing. He had not the air of a man who lied.

"Gold-pieces scattered on the floor," said the tall man thickly. "Thirty thousan' dollars."

He suddenly plunged away. There was the startled stamping of a horse's hoofs. The tall man's horse broke cover, bearing its rider and bounded away at a breakneck run. The fat man suddenly screamed curses at him. He dived into the brush

like a jackrabbit and followed. He bounced in his saddle, but he clutched a gun and shrieked curses at the man before him. The sound of their going died away.

The buzzard stirred, peering after the departed men, and then squinted at the man who remained.

He put away his gun. His eyes were hard. His lips tensed. He had a job to do. He led his horse with its blanket-wrapped burden still further up the canyon. As he went on, a mass of blackish rock with the fanciful likeness of a negro's head appeared on one of the canyon walls. He looked for a secure hiding-place for the blanket. He was clearing away a place in which to dig a hole when he saw something white in the grasses. He stared. Then he raised his head. He stared around. The black rock like a negro's head smote upon his eyes.

He looked at that for a long time. He searched further. He found three other heaps of bones which had been men.

"The men who killed my uncle," said Tom Purvis, who was the nephew of the man who had discovered the Niggerhead Mine, and the one named by that discoverer to inherit it. He smiled without mirth. "Four men he killed—and one more. They should be buried together."

He began to dig. Only part-way through the task, he stopped. Very deliberately, he approached the canyon wall. He looked here and there. Presently, with the butt of his six-gun, he dislodged a bit of rock from the wall. Wire-gold stuck out of it.

He put it in his pocket and went back to his digging—which was not for gold. But he had barely picked up his spade again when he heard a distant, muted, *"pop!"* Then another. Then something like a fusilade, as if two men were emptying their guns into each other at close range, each ferociously determined that the other should not benefit from a little cave with spilled gold-pieces all over the floor.

The man who had just rediscovered the Niggerhead Mine raised his head, but that was all. He went on digging. A little way off, though, a buzzard flapped heavily from a tree-limb and went effortfully upward and away from there. The buzzard knew shooting when it heard it.

The buzzard did not come back until dark.

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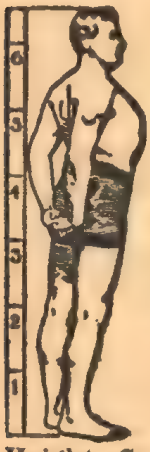

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A Prospecting Fool

By REGINALD C. BARKER

Author of "Gray Gold," "Werewolf," etc.

I

TED BRANNIGAN, red-headed, blue of eye and a trifle over six feet in height, stared disconsolately at the dripping gold pan he held between his hands. Then he sat down on a boulder to think matters over.

Since early morning, Ted had been digging holes in the bottom of Rattlesnake Gulch; but although he had panned nearly a hundred pans of sand and gravel in the pools of water left by a recent cloudburst in the otherwise dry creek bed, he had failed to find as much as a single color of gold.

Yet Sam Fisdick had told Ted that nuggets had been found in Rattlesnake Gulch. It was Sam, who, after scraping up an acquaintance with Ted down in the little railroad town of Mojave, had persuaded Ted to go prospecting with him among the box canyons and rocky ridges of the more or less desolate Tehachapi Mountains.

Sam Fisdick, a watery-eyed old desert relic, had not mentioned it until Ted, with the guilelessness of twenty years, had admitted that, lured West by the spirit of adventure, he had saved up a couple of hundred dollars, which he had on his person at the time. The information had caused Sam's eyes to gleam with interest, and his shrewd old brain began to work over time. But he saw reason why he should explain that his patched overalls, and general down-and-out appearance were more due to a dislike for hard labor, than to lack of being able to get a job.

"Tell yuh what we'll do," Sam had said. "Yuh put up the dough, and I'll take yuh back in the Tehachapis. We'll buy a coupla burros and some grub and tools and blastin' powder. I know a place where we can make a stake inside o' no time at all."

Sam went into detail, and Ted believed him, partly because Sam Fisdick was the most accomplished liar in Mojave, but mainly because Sam clinched his argument by exhibiting several pieces of quartz which glittered with streaks of virgin gold.

"I'm a prospectin' fool!" bragged Sam, "only I got a way of spendin' high, wide and handsome

Prospecting Fool Versus Desert Racketeer

every time I strike it rich. That's why I look the way I look now."

Sam forgot to mention that he had found the rich specimens some years previously, and that he used them as bait with which to lure eager strangers into the desolate mountains which encompass the Mojave Desert.

It was not that Sam Fisdick entertained any idea of doing his clients any bodily harm. He only wanted free board and tobacco as long as the other man's money lasted. To Sam's way of thinking, he was a sharp business man. He never took chances unless firmly convinced in his own mind that a stranger was not only ignorant of prospecting, but also was pretty much of a fool.

" 'Tain't my fault if the danged fools don't find no gold," Sam would say, when warned by old timers that someday one of his clients would fill him full of lead. "Everybody knows thar's gold in the hills. 'Sides, my time's wuth somethin'."

THAT Ted's time was also worth something had not occurred to Sam, but Ted was thinking about it as he sat on his rock beneath the blazing sun which made of Rattlesnake Gulch an overheated oven.

It had taken Ted nearly a year to save two hundred dollars. Less than twenty dollars remained in his pocket. True it was, that in the shack Sam Fisdick had established for his clients, there were supplies enough to last three months; also a number of mining tools which Sam hoped to sell back to the man from whom he had purchased them, when broke and disgusted, Ted should have given up his search for gold.

Ted didn't know that; nor did he know that Sam spent most of each day lying around the shack, when Ted supposed him to be prospecting in another direction.

" 'Tain't no use us both lookin' fer gold in the same place," Sam had argued. "Rattlesnake Gulch is the best bet, so I'll let yuh take it. Seein' as yuh put up the dough, seems like it's only the right thing to do."

Ted Brannigan thought of the job he had quit in order to come West. It had been his work which had aroused the desire to prospect; for he had been employed in the assaying department of a concern that specialized in analyzing the ores of rare and valuable minerals.

Ted's part of the work had been only to operate the small electric crushers which pounded to dust the sample of strange rocks sent in by hopeful prospectors, and to assist with the making-out of reports. Even so, he had gained a knowledge of minerals which far exceeded that of Sam Fisdick. For reasons of his own, Ted had never told Sam that he understood ores, but he knew beyond a shadow of doubt that the yellow metal in the specimens Sam had shown him was not iron pyrites, which is commonly known as "fools gold."

It was Ted's second week in Rattlesnake Gulch, and he was puzzled. Although he had found no gold, he had convinced himself that the creek bottom should have contained gold. All the indications which usually accompany the presence of the yellow metal Ted had found in the bottom of his gold pan. There were grains of black iron sand, particles of rusty-looking quartz, tiny fragments of garnet, topaz and other semi-precious stones such as are common in the stream beds of the Tehachapi Range. Besides, Sam had said that nuggets had been picked up in the gulch, and it had not yet occurred to Ted that the man whom he had grubstaked was a racketeer and a liar.

The harsh scream of a red-tailed desert hawk broke in on Ted's musings, and idly he watched the big bird of prey swoop toward the face of a cliff. With beating wings, the hawk rose into the air, holding a struggling gopher in its talons. A minute later, a few

pieces of rock clattered down a slope and came to a stop at Ted's feet.

Idly, he picked up a fragment and glanced at it; then a low whistle escaped his lips. Taking his knife from a pocket, he scratched the surface of the rock. He was rewarded by the gleam of a white substance which somewhat resembled silver.

Again that low whistle of excitement escaped Ted's lips. Springing to his feet, he stood looking at a slope of loose rocks which rose steeply upward until stopped by the base of a cliff hundreds of feet in height.

PICK in hand, Ted began to scramble up the slope. Loose rocks slid beneath his hobnailed boots, and rolled into the gulch behind and below him. Gophers squeaked and ran into their holes, and a five-foot red racer snake shot across Ted's path like a streak of living flame; but he heard neither the squeaking gophers, nor the rolling rocks, nor did he cast a second glance at the snake. Scrambling, falling and picking himself up, heart pounding madly against his ribs, onward he climbed, blue eyes fixed on the face of the cliff.

"I've struck it rich!" The thought hammered at Ted's brain as he climbed. Recklessly he leaped from slab to loose slab, hardly noticing the pain when the rocks slipped from beneath his feet, throwing him forward and skinning his knees.

He reached the base of the cliff at last; followed it to the right and found nothing but an outthrust shoulder of rock which stopped his further progress; turned, followed the cliff to the left, and discovered a twelve-inch vein of grayish-looking quartz, that was streaked in places with a substance which shone with the soft white sheen of metallic silver.

Ted recognized it at sight. Often he had put just such quartz through the crushers in the course of his employment as an assayer's helper. He realized that he had made a rich discovery.

Breathless and panting, he stared with wide blue eyes at the vein, wondering what Sam Fisdick would say. Then Ted Brannigan raised his pick. With a swing of his lusty right arm, he drove the point of the pick into the vein, with the idea of breaking out some specimens to take back to camp.

Ted realized his mistake too late. He had failed to notice that the face of the cliff in that particular spot was composed of rotten gneiss. Before he could strike a second blow, a slab of rock fell outward from the face of the cliff, grazed his right shoulder and knocked him head over heels. His right foot slipped into a crevice between two loose rocks, and agonizing pain seemed to wrench his knee out of its socket as his body fell forward. Then he lost consciousness.

The voice of a man talking to himself brought Ted back to a knowledge that he was still alive. As he opened his eyes, he saw Sam Fisdick sitting hunched over a tiny fire he had built in the bottom of Rattlesnake Gulch. A burro stood a few yards distant, with ears tipped forward, listening with a wise air to Sam Fisdick's lament.

"Doggone it, Sam, yuh oughta knowed better than to have sent a tenderfoot out alone. If Brannigan cashes in, yuh'll go to jail shore as yo're a foot high. Folks down to Mojave been layin' fer yuh fer years fer beatin' tenderfeet outa their dough. They'll think yuh killed the pore cuss, if yuh go back to Mojave alone."

TED'S surprise was so great that he almost gave himself away; but he checked his impulse to call out. So Sam was nothing but a racketeer! Ted was glad that he had learned the truth before he had said anything about his discovery.

Closing his eyes, he uttered a deep groan which caused Sam Fisdick to spring to his feet. Muttering beneath his breath, he stooped over the injured youth.

"Hurt bad, Brannigan?" asked Sam, whiskered face puckered with anxiety. "How come yuh got hurt?"

"Climbed up to the cliff looking for a

vein. Struck it with my pick," explained Ted. "A rock fell and knocked me cuckoo."

"Yuh danged prospectin' fool!" Sam tried to hide his concern with a show of anger. "I got plumb worried and set out to hunt yuh up. Kin yuh move yore laig?"

Ted tried to, but an agonizing pain told of twisted ligaments which would lay him up for some little time.

Aided by Sam Fisdick, who never ceased grumbling, Ted managed to mount the burro. An hour later, he was lying on his blankets in the shack. His right leg was badly swollen, and there was a lump the size of a duck's egg on his right shoulder, which put that arm entirely out of commission.

Sam Fisdick did all he could do to relieve the pain, and reduce the swelling. Most of the night he spent applying cold compresses to the injured man's leg and shoulder. Toward dawn, Ted fell into uneasy sleep, and Sam promptly climbed into his own bunk, and began to snore heavily.

When Ted awoke, Sam was sitting at the table wolfing down a hearty meal. He turned his head, and blinked uncertainly as Ted spoke.

"Guess you'll have to do the prospecting in Rattlesnake Gulch until I can get around, Sam."

"Who, me?" Sam scratched his scanty gray hair doubtfully. So far as he knew no mineral had ever been found in Rattlesnake Gulch; therefore the idea did not appeal to him. "I got other plans," he mumbled. "'Sides, yuh've been pokin' around that gulch fer nigh onto two weeks now. If gold was thar, I reck'n yuh'd hev found it."

"I reckon I would," said Ted dryly. But his tone of irony was lost on the old desert racketeer, who had not the least idea that his proposed victim had discovered his duplicity.

"Shore, yuh would hev found it," agreed Sam. "So it ain't no use me diggin' in Rattlesnake Gulch. Now, I know of a place——"

"But you said nuggets had been found in Rattlesnake Gulch," Ted reminded him. "It was you who took me there in the first place."

Sam Fisdick gulped down a mouthful of coffee to hide his embarrassment, then wiped his hairy lips with the back of a gnarled hand.

"Shore, nuggets was found thar," he lied, "but that don't mean thar are any more of 'em. A man kin make mistakes, can't he?"

"You said it, old timer," agreed Ted. "But a man who makes the same mistake a second time is a damned fool!"

NOT caring to argue the matter, Sam changed the subject by bringing Ted his breakfast, for he was quite unable to stand on his injured leg. Later, the old racketeer announced his intention of "takin' a look around in a place I know of," and left Ted to his reflections.

Sam had spoken the truth for once when he had said he "knew of a place." He spent the day there, lying flat on his back in the shade cast by a thicket of scrubby bushes which surrounded a pool of clear water. When Sam was not smoking he was sleeping, while his burro hitched to a bush, thought the thoughts that burros think.

"Any luck?" asked Ted that evening.

"Not yit," Sam sighed wearily. "I dug and panned all day long without strikin' a color, and am danged near tuckered out. But tomorrow I'll strike it sure. I know of a place——"

"So do I," said Ted. "I cooked a pot of bacon and beans; and the coffee is boiling. Let's eat."

HE STRUGGLED to his feet and limped into the shack. With his left hand he set the beans and coffee on the table. Sam appeared a few minutes later, after having unpacked his burro and turned it loose.

"How's yore laig?" asked Sam.

"Not so good," replied Ted. "And my right arm is on the bum. Guess it will be

some time before I can do much."

"Yuh don't need to do a thing," said Sam. "I'll 'tend to everything. Tomorrow I'm going to go to a place I know of——"

"Listen, Sam," said Ted. "Down in Rattlesnake Gulch I struck a vein which looks as if it contained silver. Guess you'd better stake out a claim for both of us, and do the location work."

"Huh?" Sam spilled coffee out of the cup he was raising to his lips, and blinked watery eyes uncertainly. "Silver ain't wuth nuthin'."

"Maybe not," agreed Ted. "but take a look at this specimen I had in my pocket. What do you think of it?"

Sam didn't think much of the specimen Ted handed him. He thought still less of Ted's request that he do the location work on a claim in Rattlesnake Gulch. That meant plenty of hard labor beneath a broiling sun. It made Sam sick to think of it.

"Yo're crazy," said Sam. "That ain't only white iron in yore speciment. I know. I'm a prospectin' fool!"

"White iron or no white iron, you'd better locate a claim and start a tunnel in the cliff," said Ted.

"Who, me?" Sam's lower jaw dropped and disclosed his yellow teeth.

"Seems like you owe me that much," said Ted. "After all, I grubstaked you."

"But I tell yuh thar ain't nothin' thar," protested Sam.

"You told me there was gold in Rattlesnake Gulch, and I believe there is," insisted Ted. "I can't do any work at present, so it's up to you to do it for me."

WELL, I ain't a-goin' to!" Sam rose up in his wrath, and his chin whiskers quivered with anger. "Who do yuh think yuh are," he demanded, "settin' thar a-givin' me orders?"

Ted's blue eyes flashed, but he controlled his anger. After all, he reflected, crippled as he was, he was more or less at the mercy of Sam Fisdick, who, storming backward and forth across the shack, looked as if he might resort to the revolver he kept beneath the blankets of his bunk.

"I'm only expecting you to do what I'd do if you were in my place," said Ted patiently.

"I ain't a-goin' to locate no white iron claim fer nobody," grumbled Sam. "I know of a place——"

Then Ted's temper got the better of him, and he exploded into righteous wrath.

"You four-flushing old racketeer," he rapped out. "Think I'm not onto your game? All you care about is to lie around and eat another man's grub. I know of a place, too, that you may go to. I hope you find it hot enough. If you're an honest prospector, then I'm a Mojave Indian!"

Sam Fisdick paused in his stride. He could hardly believe his own ears. Never before had one of his victims dared tell him "where to head in at." The attack was beyond Sam's comprehension, and the insult to his prospecting ability was a sore hurt to the remnant of his pride.

For, in spite of Sam's faults, he did "know of a place," but his natural indolence had kept him from doing any work on it, and his cupidity had prevented him from leading any of his clients into a certain canyon, where Sam had found a vein of ore which he really believed to contain gold.

In a vague way, the old racketeer expected to develop his prospect at some future date when no longer should he find it easy to fleece tenderfeet out of their money. Now, stung into anger, Sam Fisdick made up his mind that the very next morning he would start work on the vein he had discovered years before. He'd show that

danged tenderfoot a thing or two about prospecting!

That he would have to eat Ted's provisions and use his tools and dynamite had been quite overlooked by Sam Fisdick until Ted's next words recalled it to his memory.

"Look here, Sam," said Ted. "I can't work at present and you won't work; but I'm going to need the grub and tools. As soon as I'm able to use my arm, I'm going to locate a claim in Rattlesnake Gulch. Such being the case, you'd better pull stakes."

"Who, me?" This was something else again, and Sam's jaw dropped. "Yuh mean that yo're kickin' me out, after I brung yuh up hyar?"

"You said it, Sam." Ted's eyes were hard as steel. "You've had all that's coming to you; but you may take one of the burros and enough grub to last you back to Mojave."

"Why, that ain't no way to act, Brannigan," sputtered Sam Fisdick. Then a crafty gleam crept into his bleared eyes, as an idea struck him. "Seein' as yo're so set on it, I'll locate a claim in Rattlesnake Gulch fer yuh. 'Tain't no skin off my nose if yuh choose to act like a danged fool."

"I thought you would see light," grinned Ted. "Just to prove that you are doing the work, you might bring in a few specimens of rock every evening when you return to camp. The vein I found is in the cliff just above where my foot became pinned between the rocks. You can't miss it."

Sam had no intention of missing it, and the next evening he brought to the shack several pieces of rock broken out of the vein Ted had found. Sam's overalls were covered with dust; his whiskers were full of it, and his hands bore the grimy results of a day's work with pick and shovel.

"Thar's yore speciments," he grumbled. "They'll be something fer yuh to play with while yo're gettin' well."

"Make much progress, Sam?" Ted's hand was trembling as he fingered the pieces of rock.

"Shore, I did," grunted Sam. But he saw no reason to explain that after breaking out a sack full of chunks from the vein Ted had found in Rattlesnake Gulch, he had spent the rest of the day in another canyon, doing the location work on his own prospect.

Morning after morning, Sam returned to work on his own prospect, and evening after evening he handed Ted specimens of rock from the vein in Rattlesnake Gulch, explaining in detail just how much work he had accomplished during the day.

AT THE end of a month, Ted's suspicions of Sam Fisdick had died, and he was feeling sorry that he had misjudged the man. By that time Ted's arm was all right again, and save for a slight limp, he was able to get around. But, fearing too much exertion, he had contented himself with doing the camp work, for he was saving his strength for the long hike back to Mojave, when he should return to record his claim.

Ted was sitting outside the shack one day, when suddenly the boom of an explosion shattered the silence. It was followed by another explosion; then by three more in rapid succession.

Ted had been expecting to hear the explosions, for the previous evening Sam had said that he was ready to do some blasting. However, he had not mentioned that the blasting was to be done on his own prospect, where for weeks past he had been working on a vein which showed indications of containing gold.

That the day was fast approaching when Ted would discover that no work had been done in Rattlesnake Gulch was beginning to worry Sam. He hated to think of what might happen to him when his client discovered his duplicity. Sam thought that the only way in which he could save himself from flight was by finding gold, and splitting fifty-fifty with the tenderfoot he had brought into the hills.

The echoes of the blasting bounced from wall to canyon wall, and Ted rose to his feet. For moments he stood thinking, with a strange expression creeping into his eyes. For Sam had overlooked an important item. The sound of the blasting had reached Ted from a different direction to that in which Sam was supposed to be working!

Even then, Ted did not connect the blasting with Sam Fisdick. He thought that other prospectors were using dynamite, for many men spend their lives seeking mineral among the canyons of the Tehachapi Range.

MORE because he could wait no longer to see the results of Sam's work than any thought of spying upon him, Ted decided to take a look at his claim, now that he felt able to get around. Thinking that perhaps his leg might give way under him, he took Sam's revolver along, so that in case of accident he might fire three shots to attract Sam's attention.

When Ted reached Rattlesnake Gulch and discovered that no work had been done on the vein, his anger was so great that he might have shot Sam, had the old racketeer appeared at that moment.

Seating himself on a boulder, Ted stared at the vein in the cliff with angry eyes. After all, he would have to do the location work himself. First of all, though, he would demand an explanation from Sam.

Sam was down on his knees throwing chunks of rock into a pile when the sound of a footstep behind him caused him to glance over his shoulder. Ted was eyeing him over the barrel of a leveled revolver.

"You skunk!" Sam shrank beneath the biting anger in Ted's voice. "You dirty four-flushing skunk; killing is too good for you!"

"Now listen, Brannigan," quavered the frightened old racketeer, "what I done, I done fer yore own good. Thar ain't nothin' but white iron in that vein yuh found. But hyar—look at it, Brannigan. I struck a pocket of rich ore. Took out a hundred pounds of quartz that is purty near half gold!"

Ted's eyes wandered over the broken rock piled at Sam's feet. The old racketeer was right. The prospect he had been too lazy to work for twenty years had yielded a pocket of quartz which contained about ten thousand dollars worth of gold!

UNDER other conditions, Ted would have yelled with excitement, but for long pain-filled weeks his mind had been set on staking a claim in Rattlesnake Gulch, and his just resentment at the manner in which he had been treated overcame all other feelings.

"A lot of good it will do you, Sam," he said tensely. "You ate my grub, used my tools and dynamite, and probably would have got away with the gold if I hadn't heard the blasting and tracked you down. That gold is mine, Sam."

"Fifty-fifty," pleaded the old racketeer. "It's the fust strike I ever made. I'll split fifty-fifty with yuh and I'll do all the work on yore claim in Rattlesnake Gulch. 'Tain't no ha'r off'n my chest if it contains nothin' but white iron."

So the bargain was made, and day after day Sam Fisdick worked on the vein Ted had discovered.

Day after day until the mouth of a ten-foot-deep tunnel yawned blackly in the face of the cliff above Rattlesnake Gulch. But through the three weeks of labor, Ted never lifted a hand to help the man who had duped him. Grimly, with Sam's revolver strapped to his hip, Ted sat watching while the old racketeer worked and sweated in the torrid heat.

And slowly Sam's resentment grew to a pitch where thoughts of murder entered his mind. To think that he should have been outwitted by a tenderfoot was gall to his scheming brain. He might not have been so angry had he found any sign of gold in the tons of rock he blasted out of the vein in the cliff. But the rock appeared

to contain nothing but a shining substance whch resembled silver, but which Sam insisted was nothing but worthless white iron.

At last the location work was finished, the claim staked, and the location notice placed in an empty tomato can, nailed to the top of a four-foot-high stake; whereupon Sam announced his intention of leaving the hills.

"I'm never coming back," he said. "I've made my stake, and I'm through."

Ted grinned cheerfully. He had won his point, and he could afford to grin. Without having performed a lick of work, he was returning from the hills the richer by five thousand dollars worth of gold ore. It mattered little to him that the discovery of the rich pocket had exhausted the vein on Sam's prospect.

"Bet you that you'll be back in the Tehachapis inside of thirty days, Sam," said Ted. "I'll bet you my share of the gold."

Was the tenderfoot crazy with the heat? Sam eyed him with ill concealed fear and suspicion. It didn't sound reasonable to the old racketeer that Ted would be willing to bet five thousand dollars worth of ore, when all he would have left would be a vein containing white iron, which, as even Sam Fisdick knew, was absolutely worthless. Still, reflected Sam, that was the tenderfoot's lookout, and the old racketeer signed a penciled agreement which stipulated that if he returned to the Tehachapis within thirty days, he would forfeit his share of the gold he had found.

"Meanwhile, we'll leave all the gold ore with the bank for safe keeping," said Ted. "You fooled me once, Sam, and I'm not taking any chances with you. We'll hold out enough of the gold to pay our expenses for the next month."

A few days before the month was up, Sam received word from Ted to meet him in the Bank of Mojave.

"Well, Sam," said the tenderfoot, "are you coming back to Rattlesnake Gulch with me?"

"Who, me?" Sam, in all the glory of a new suit, a clean shave and a fat cigar, shook his grizzled head. "No, sirree, Brannigan," he said. "Soon as I've collected my bet I'm headin' fer Los Angeles. I know of a place——"

"So do I," grinned Ted. "I sent some of the ore from the vein in Rattlesnake Gulch to a firm of assayers for whom I used to work. Read this report, will you?"

Lips moving slowly, Sam Fisdick read the assay report aloud, to the amusement of a bespectacled bank teller who was watching him through a brass grill. Then the sheet of paper fluttered from the old racketeer's gnarled fingers.

"Why it wasn't white iron at all," gasped Sam Fisdick. "The report says the samples yuh sent in from Rattlesnake Gulch was tellurium ore, carrying gold to the value of thirty-five thousand dollars a ton!" His voice rose, as he stared at Ted. "And I throwed up my chance of gettin' in on it," howled Sam Fisdick, "fer the sake of a measly five thousand bucks!"

"So you are not going back," said Ted mildly. "I had an idea you would. But it's all right with me. I can afford to lose five thousand dollars."

"Shore, I'm goin' back," yelled Sam. "I'm goin' back right now and immediate to locate an extension to yore claim." He swung around on the grinning bank teller, and shouted loud enough for everybody in Mojave to hear. "Transfer my share of that gold yo're holdin' to Ted Brannigan's account. I'm headin' back to the hills."

"No need to be in a hurry about it, Sam," said Ted. "Fact of the matter is that I recorded the claim in Rattlesnake Gulch in both our names. Figured it was the only square thing to do. I never would have discovered the vein of tellurium ore if I hadn't fallen a victim to the damndest old liar in Mojave!"

"Yuh mean—yuh don't mean——" Sam gulped, then he seized both his client's hands in a crushing grip. "Why—why—" sputtered Sam Fisdick, "yuh damn' young prospectin' fool!"

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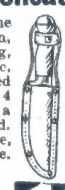

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